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Sf impulse

WITH STORIES BY

**RICHARD WILSON | BRIAN W. ALDISS | CHRIS HEBRON**



# sf impulse

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## CONTENTS

### STORIES:

THE BAD BUSH OF UZORO by <i>Chris Hebron</i>	4
JUST PASSING THROUGH by <i>Brian W. Aldiss</i>	17
INCONSTANCY by <i>Brian M. Stableford</i>	30
THE NUMBER YOU HAVE JUST REACHED by <i>Thomas M. Disch</i>	43
THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS by <i>Paul Jents</i>	53
IT'S SMART TO HAVE AN ENGLISH ADDRESS by <i>D. G. Compton</i>	78
IMPASSE by <i>Chris Priest</i>	95
SEE ME NOT by <i>Richard Wilson</i>	98

### ARTICLES:

EDITORIAL	2
KEITH ROBERTS <i>rereads</i> LUCIAN OF SAMOSATOS	139
BOOK FARE	147
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR	152

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# Editorial . . . . . by Keith Roberts

(Mr. Harrison is at present unavailable, having made tracks for Philadelphia)

It isn't often possible, in the strains and stresses of producing a monthly magazine, for an editor to do a spot of honest-to-God anthologising. Either the material isn't to hand, or it's just exactly the wrong length, or that story old so-and-so promised didn't come in, or something just perfect turns up the day after press date, or there simply isn't enough time between one issue and the next to do everything one might wish. This being the case, those opportunities that do occur are seized on by myself at least with more than ordinary enthusiasm. I had a chance, when compiling sf IMPULSE 12, to put together a group of stories that seemed to me to present a coherent whole; and I hope you like the result. The "gift package" starts with Chris Hebron's THE BAD BUSH OF UZORO, and terminates with D. G. Compton's IT'S SMART TO HAVE AN ENGLISH ADDRESS. Within this series each story illustrates, in its own special way, an odd aspect of the human psyche; and what is interesting is the way the treatments range from classic fantasy to hard-core science fiction.

Running through them briefly, Chris Hebron's story is cast almost in the form of a classic ghost yarn. It *isn't* a ghost yarn by any means, there's far more to it than that. It's based on hard fact, it describes a part of Africa Chris has reason to know very well indeed and the customs and traditions referred to are accurate. This is the sort of real, living material one finds so seldom in sf; there's still enough weirdness and blackness on our own planet to put the best of bug-eyed monsters in the shade, and THE BAD BUSH OF UZORO is both frightening and provocative.

Brian W. Aldiss' JUST PASSING THROUGH provides an abrupt change of pace. Oblique and skilful, it describes a strange "adventure of the mind" in terms of an imagery that is always compelling, never obtrusive. There are few writers in the field who can match the Aldiss ability to create a scene and a mood with a few swift touches; this story is evocative writing at its best. Brian M. Stableford's

INCONSTANCY is different again; a formal fantasy on man and his environment, it has qualities of restraint and control that are remarkable in such a comparatively new author. THE NUMBER YOU HAVE JUST REACHED is a suave and polished account of a man's obsessive fantasy. Or is it fantasy? One is never quite sure; and Thomas M. Disch is far too skilled a writer to give too much away.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS, by Paul Jents, again strikes a completely different note. This is classic sf; the elements of ten thousand space operas have been recombined, with new and telling effect. It can be read as an adventure tale, it *is* an adventure tale and a good one too. But it's also something more; a shrewd and perceptive examination of an emotional problem, the adjustment of a man to his environment. You might not agree with Mr. Jents' conclusions; but either way this is one that leaves you thinking. The same can be said of D. G. Compton's IT'S SMART TO HAVE AN ENGLISH ADDRESS. This is an uneasy, restless story, both moving and subtle; the author's treatment has a quiet economy that masks a new and wholly unexpected dimension of fear.

In addition we have a long complete story by Richard Wilson, and a good complement of features and articles. So it's a varied diet this month, with excursions into the bizarre, the unusual, the beautiful and the downright terrifying.

Happy reading!

— KEITH ROBERTS

*Readers of sf IMPULSE will by now be familiar with the unusual and provocative work of Chris Hebron. We recently asked Chris, who spent some years in Africa, whether his experiences there had not provided the basis for a story. THE BAD BUSH OF UZORO is the result. At first sight it might read like a ghost story; but it's much more than that. The mission station described does in fact exist, and it is reputed to be haunted; the background is genuine, drawn from Yoruba legend, and Chris tells us he used to pass this particular piece of "bad bush" regularly on his way to buy avocados. This is fantasy with a difference; and a chillingly effective yarn into the bargain.*



# CHRIS HEBRON

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# THE BAD BUSH OF UZORO

This is the legend of the Bad Bush of Uzoro, exactly as it was told to me by Father Flynn, sitting on the verandah of the S.D.O.'s house at Ughelli, drinking Carlsberg beer and looking across the Reservation to the spinney where the crown birds roosted, and the artificial hill put up by a previous S.D.O. to provide a focus for the eye among all the flat sameness of the Niger Delta.

"You ask me whether juju is real," said Father Flynn, "and whether there's any truth that the Old Ones that that mad American wrote about still inhabit—or rather I should say 'interpenetrate'—remote places of the world, such as this jungle. Obviously you expect me as a good Catholic to say no. You want me to say no anyway. But, it's not that easy.

"Out there," he went on, pointing to the jungle beyond the Reservation, in the general direction of the Government College, "according to Urhobo tradition, is territory simply not intended for man. They call it the Bad Bush: the Yorubas, whose name for it is better known, call it Oke Orisha, the Bush of Ghosts. Now, whether Lovecraft had access to some racial subconscious or something—or even something more than that—is another matter: but the descriptions of those ghosts given by Tutuola, say, or the creatures Irinkerindo met in the Forest of Olodumare, strike a chord: one has met them before. Everyone has met them before. The creature whose body resembles worms or flies; the rolling, talking gourd. No matter. Whether they exist or not, is also another question."

It was beginning to get dark: insect noises were starting up. A few fireflies flickered, here and there; a family of geckos ran about between the supports of the verandah roof, hunting for night moths. The usual drumming began to be heard, from the village down the creek. The steward brought us a plate of groundnuts, and some more beer.

"You were talking about Obiaruku, before," went on Father Flynn, "and how your car broke down there once, and you were afraid of what you thought was the evil in the place, and how you felt the crowd that gathered was

liable to lynch you. But Obiaruku's not the wickedest place in the Delta, by any means. That, without any doubt, is Uzoro. Logically, the Mission has a station there.

"The Mission at Uzoro is built on a piece of this Bad Bush. There used to be a shrine there, under an *iroko* tree. Everyone knows *iroko* trees are full of ghosts. It's not in the town itself of course; the Obi of the town wouldn't let the missionaries settle in it. He knew something of the Catholic faith, and was afraid the battles between the angels and the ghosts, which he was certain would take place, would catch his people in the crossfire; and believe me, that's neither as silly nor as humorous as it sounds. The people of Uzoro don't care for strangers anyway, and mostly strangers don't care for them. They're a surly, withdrawn lot—very un-African in many respects. Not very bright either, for the most part: there's only one road out of the place—more like a track, really—which goes out for half of every year when the Niger floods start to come down, and they must have interbred for centuries. They speak their own archaic dialect—but then, the whole of this province is full of dialects and little enclaves of people. You know.

"So the Obi gave the missionaries a piece of Bad Bush to build on, where the townsfolk had killed and buried twin babies—because, you see, one twin must be a ghost masquerading as a human being, an *abiku*, and it's impossible to tell which one so you'd better kill both—and the Mission took him up on it. They couldn't get any local labour to build for them, not even clear the ground; they did it all themselves. The villagers stood at a distance, watching and muttering. They tried to chop down the *iroko* tree, but it made such a whistling and twittering—the way they do, when the sap rises in them—that the Fathers realised to go any further would alienate the townspeople completely, and left it as it was. The villagers no doubt thought the ghosts had won.

"You'll notice I sometimes refer to Uzoro as a town, and sometimes as a village. Like many West African communities, it had something of the nature of both.

"The Mission was never very successful. Converts were few, and their brand of Catholicism was tainted with practices that were suspect to say the least of it. Also,

after a while, various accidents began to happen to the buildings ; and it became progressively harder and harder to keep staff in the place, both lay and cleric. Word got around that the Uzoro mission was haunted. It was at that point that I was sent to take the place over. I was young then, and I think my Bishop regarded me as something of a troubleshooter. Full of faith in the wrong things—which is to say, faith in myself—I set out.

"I arrived in Uzoro in the evening. The Mission station was the usual two-storey building, with a long verandah running the length of the first floor front, and a staircase going up onto it, through the building, in the middle. It stood on the far side of the *iroko* tree from the road, and at the back of it was a cluster of single-storey quarters where the Mission servants were supposed to live. Although it was evening, there wasn't a light in the place. The main door hung loose, swinging to and fro, and I noticed that the green paint was peeling here and there on the window frames and the supports of the verandah. At the foot of the *iroko* tree were chicken feathers and some marks that looked like blood. The sun was going down, over the tangled mass of western bush.

"I pushed my way in through the broken door, and went up. The stairs were wood, riddled with termites, and gave, creaking ominously, underneath my feet: one actually gave way, just after I had passed it, with a sharp crack as if it had been trodden on a second time, heavily. Loose leaves from the *iroko*, that had blown in, lay about on them here and there. From the broken step there came a slight puff of dust (dried rotted wood), which stirred them a little. When I reached the top, the sun was almost at the horizon, and flooding the top level of the building with a light like blood ; all in all, it was a classical haunted house setting. I felt one couldn't have done better if one'd made it up.

"I explored the top half of the building with this sense of the ludicrously melodramatic well in mind, but keeping one hand on my rosary just in case. The whole place was deserted, paint peeling, hinges broken off doors, big spiders' webs in the corners. Looking more closely, I saw that the blood-like appearance wasn't, as I had at first imagined, entirely the result of the light. The whole

floor—verandah, rooms, everything—was covered with a fine layer of dark red dust; laterite, blown in from the compound outside to a depth which suggested several dry seasons. The building must have been empty almost from the time it was put up. Here and there, though, were marks, scrape marks, distorted footprints, where the dust was less thick than at other places, suggesting that someone—more than one person it seemed—had visited the rooms since they were abandoned. In every case they appeared to have departed hurriedly. But nowhere was there any sign of present habitation.

"It was getting dark now. I descended the staircase—there was no other means of access to the top floor—and made my way across the back, out by another door, to the boys' quarters. Here again most of the rooms were uninhabited, for at this time the Mission-house rated only a skeleton staff (what an appropriate term!) But a few rooms in the centre were occupied and in front of them, as I approached, I saw the small group of children surrounding a tripod, on which the traditional communal iron cooking-pot—the 'ikoko'—was suspended over a three-log fire; Urhobo culture had never invented the 'grate. Here I was met by the head servant, whose name was Ezekiel.

"'Welcome, Father,' he said. 'I t'ink na dissy day you dey come. De bed done ready: 'e dey for datty house.' He gestured with his thumb towards one of the boys' quarters.

"'Why have you put me there?' I replied. 'I don't want to sleep there, my place is in the Mission. I want to sleep in the Mission.'

"'Person no fit sleep for datty house,' answered Ezekiel, in tones which made it clear he at least was badly frightened. 'Na ghost for datty house no fit 'gree for sleep again. Na ghost for datty place fit catch European. 'E go suffer 'am, proper: 'e go chop 'am, so-so-so. But dissy place 'e no fit reach again. Master make 'e 'gree for sleep for dissy place: more better so, o na too much.' I had travelled a long way that day; I was too tired to argue. But I was still determined eventually to sleep once again in the Mission-house; the more so since, being so tired that sleep would not come easily, I

walked out of my room into the moonlight and saw the Mission standing there with not the slightest untoward sound or any indication that it was haunted at all.

"Over the succeeding few days I introduced myself to the Obi and people of the town. I continued, for the time being, to sleep in the boys' quarters; but still with the intention of moving into the Mission itself as soon as I could prevail upon someone from among the converts to make me some furniture to replace the original stuff, which was missing, and as soon as I could persuade Ezekiel to move it in and prepare the place for me. Gradually I began to piece together the following facts, or what the locals believed were facts; that the Mission was haunted; that the ghost or ghosts (accounts varied as to how many there were and what they were like, though everyone agreed they were dangerously malevolent) had that very rare thing as far as West African belief is concerned, power over Europeans; that they were particularly associated with the stairway, part of which had nearly collapsed under me; that there had been several attempts since the hauntings started to occupy the building, on the part of persons from outside; that every one of these had ended in the hasty departure of those persons, crying in each case that someone or something was trying to kill them as they slept; that the hauntings had, reputedly, begun on the evening of the attempt to cut down the *iroko* tree. I personally regarded this, despite the origins of the place, as pretty straightforward superstition. I was still determined to restore the Mission's standing in the local town by moving into the building and occupying it successfully. Eventually I got the furniture, moved it in myself since no one else was prepared to do so, and persuaded Ezekiel to serve my meals to me there, at least during the hours of daylight. Finally, I moved in.

"The first few days were quiet enough. Ezekiel had fixed up a dining-room for me, on the ground floor, and a study next to it into which I could move my books and the rest of my loads, half of it was equipped with a local table, that served me for a desk, and an Ikot Ekpene cane-weave chair: the rest of it was full of packing cases, which surrounded me as I worked. I had finally prevailed

on him to fit out one of the upstairs rooms as a bedroom ; haunting or not, it had to be the room next to the staircase. He simply would not come any further into the top floor of the building.

"So, my suspicions were lulled. I began to think of the legend of the haunting as simply another piece of unwarranted local belief ; so apparently did the villagers, for gradually they started coming to see me in the Mission building. The whole episode appeared to be going to blow over ; I had had no idea it would be that easy.

"Nothing ever did happen during the day, anyway. But very gradually, as time wore on, I became aware that my nights were becoming disturbed. It was coming up to the rains, and the humidity was increasing daily ; from time to time, and more persistently each time, I began to find myself waking uneasily during the night, for what reason I could not tell. At first I put it down to this increasing heaviness in the air.

"Very slowly, however, it began to dawn on me that these awakenings were beginning to follow a regular pattern. At first, for the first week or so, say, I would wake only once during the night, around four a.m. : then I began to wake twice, three times, four times. Eventually I was beginning to wake every hour ; my sleep in between had become shallow, and I was nearly always tired, but if I went to bed earlier than usual I could not rest at all. The air of the place seemed to be becoming more and more oppressive. I began to suffer from fits of irritation, and nervous forebodings ; I was not so crass as to put these down simply to the lack of sleep, but neither was I prepared to believe that the mission really was haunted. If I came to any conclusions at all, they were that the weather and my knowledge of the old stories had combined to affect me ; I was rather annoyed with myself for falling prey to superstition as easily as this, and this added to my general irritability. At this juncture, like a sort of cool wind blowing through the place, the wakings abruptly ceased. I had four nights' good sleep, and awoke feeling refreshed and congratulating myself that now it was over. Then, on the fifth night, I woke again at four a.m., this time to the sound of noises.

"At first I couldn't make out what they were. Then,

gradually, I began to place them. They were very faint, and considerably indistinct—as if coming from a long way away, or through some muffling medium, such as thick, dusty sand, but slowly they were becoming louder, clearer. At last I was able to recognise the sound of someone moving around the foot of the stairs.

“Very quietly, I got out of bed, opened the door slowly, and crept out onto the verandah, keeping close to the wall so that I should not be seen. I must have looked an odd sight—I had removed my habit on retiring, and was dressed only in the regulation underwear which is all our Order wears underneath it. As I did so, the sounds stopped, as I had half expected they would. Whoever—whatever—it was that was making the noise, had gone.

“The next morning, I laughed at myself for that ‘whatever’. Obviously my midnight intruder had been one of the mission servants returning home from the town rather drunk, and he had disappeared quickly when he realised where it was his stumbles had led him. Obviously; although when I asked, none of the servants would admit to being in the town the previous night. But that wasn’t too surprising either; I naturally did not tell them why I wanted to know, and no doubt they thought that if they confessed to that particular variety of the sin of gluttony they would get a dismissal rather than a penance and absolution. It’s extraordinary how the African mind confuses all the different versions of Christianity, so that Catholics wind up being thought of as having all the characteristics of Methodists, and vice versa. Although, come to think of it, could you distinguish clearly between a Shiite and a Sunnite Muslim? Probably not. However . . .

“The next night, I was woken again; and the next; and the next—in each case by the same muffled sounds, that gradually became audible as footsteps around the base of the stairs, and ceased as I went to look for them. And then the previous pattern began to recur. I was woken more and more frequently over successive nights, always by the same indistinct footsteps, until once again I was virtually unable to sleep. Always, when I went out to look for the intruder, there was no one there. And then as before, at the height of the attack the manifestations ceased, and a cool wind of sleep blew through the house.

"I had no doubt, now, that I was in fact faced with an attack by spiritual evil. The pattern of events, even though they had not yet threatened me in any way, and the curious atmosphere of heaviness that clung to the old mission like a transcendental smell at the height of the attacks, could not be explained in any other way. I am not going to pretend I was not afraid ; I was. If this was, as now seemed very likely, a manifestation of the Powers of Darkness that I was dealing with, then it would have to be exorcised, and exorcism is a dangerous business. In my own days as a student at Cambridge, reading Maths —all our Order have to read a scientific discipline, you know, as well as undergoing their usual theological training, in Dublin or at Oscot or whatever—a priest had been called in to attempt to exorcise the ghost in the Old Room at Corpus. The spirit had departed ; but the priest had come out—been led out rather—the following morning, a white-haired imbecile. We don't talk about this too much, and it doesn't happen at every exorcism by any means, but nevertheless it can ; one does not become involved in these procedures lightly. I was not surprised that my predecessors had run ; nevertheless, I stayed. To what effect, you will see directly.

"It seemed to me that it would be necessary first to learn more about the behaviour of this spirit, or whatever. Just because exorcism is such a dangerous business, one approaches it systematically. In the first place, if the manifestations are only trivial—a nuisance rather than a danger—one leaves them alone, unless they actively interfere with the prosecution of the Faith. Usually that is for the Bishop to decide—but communications being what they are here it was likely I would have to decide it myself, and clearly my own senses could tell me the Faith was being interfered with ; if for no other reason, because the thing was leading to the Mission being left depopulated of priests. In the second place, if the force is embodied in, or centred upon, a human being, as it often is—in poltergeist cases for instance—then the correct procedure is not exorcism but either the confessional or psychoanalysis, depending upon what's wrong. Psychoanalysis of Africans can be done, but it's no easy matter: about the only man who knows how to do it really well was four

hundred miles away, in Abeokuta. That seemed to rule that out. As to the confessional, well, so far there had been no evidence that there was any human being at the back of this, with or without anything to confess, let alone any lead as to what that thing might be. So really, it did boil down after all to exorcism. In that case, the crucial thing was to find out the maximum force of the manifestations; it was this that would determine just how much spiritual force would have to be brought to bear in the exorcism itself, and whether or not it would be likely to burn out the vessel in which it was concentrated—in this case, one Father Michael Flynn, S.J. You'll excuse me if don't go any further into the details of the matter than this. It's what the faithful would call a Mystery, and what the faithless would refer to, I suppose, as a trade secret. Well: that's the way of things in this world; but I really mustn't say any more.

"So I waited, knowing that the wind of sleep would pass and the attack would return—and not knowing what it would be. The grey cloud-cover that heralds the rains had come up from the south; the sun broke through now only at evening, when again the blood-red light fell on everything like level floodwater. And I waited.

"The wakings began again, went through their now accustomed cycle of increase, and again stopped. This time the sounds were louder, and their very indistinctness was—how shall I put this?—somehow more pronounced. One felt one knew why they were indistinct—that the feet that walked were not walking like our feet, were not in contact with that which sounded. (It is difficult to express this). I did not leave my room; I knew I would see nothing. The Walker was now halfway up the stairs.

"Time passed. I did not go out. I said my Office privately, within doors, and saw as few people as possible. Aside from the irritability and the lack of sleep, I was beginning to travel through myself, trying to withdraw to some central region, some level where all my resources could be gathered together to await the onslaught that I was now certain was coming. I no longer asked myself whether I should be sane at the end of it. Ezekiel had disappeared some three or four weeks previously; I did not attempt to find out where he had gone. The remain-

ing boys cooked my meals, after a fashion, and I saw to the bedroom myself. The Walker had reached the top-most step, and I knew the end could not be far off. I knew, too, that it would be too soon ; that I was not ready for it. But I no longer felt any sense of fear about this. It was as if a wall had descended about me ; the fact of my death was becoming objective.

"Another thing had also become apparent in the sounds. They had taken on a dead, mechanical quality, as if the feet were not placing themselves, but one after the other were being placed. The sort of sound in fact, that one hears in the late symphonies of Mahler.

"The end came quickly. The last waking did not begin gradually like the others. I jumped into full awakeness, suddenly, with a sharp tingling of consciousness such as heralds a sudden drop in temperature. I could sense to the south the rain clouds sweeping in from the sea, jagged, black, billowing, headlong. It suddenly became terribly important whether they would arrive in time. I could sense, too, that the Walker had left the top of the stairway. Sullen, reverberating, distinct at last, the mechanical steps were making their way along the landing: they reached the door.

"I slid out of bed, unravelled the cord of my habit and pressed myself motionless against the far wall. It was dark. Dense cloud. The door opened, admitting darkness on darkness: darkness slipped through it. I held my breath.

"Something moved in the bedroom, making its way slowly towards the head of the bed. Something physical. Single-minded, unaware of anything else. The little light admitted through the door glinted on a knife, raised, striking again and again, blindly, at the pillows. Striking unconsciously, meaninglessly.

"Suddenly I realised that the power that I had come to call the Walker could not kill ; from the movements of the knife, I knew that in this last attack, it had had to find a human being through whom to work. The movements of the knife were human movements ; but movements neither of sanity nor insanity but of possession. That was why the steps had been distinct this time. All this

I saw in very much less time than it has taken me to say it.

"So it had come. Without conscious thought, I reached behind me, grabbed with my right hand at the crucifix that stood on the bracket fixed to the angle of wall opposite the bed, above my makeshift prie-dieu, and held it out towards the figure still blindly stabbing the empty bed. Without conscious thought, I heard my own voice begin: '*O Spirit, of whatsoever name thou art, in the name of Jesus Christ, God, Son of God, Saviour, I conjure thee to depart from this habitation, into darkness, even into the Red Sea . . .*' I will not give you the text in the Latin, you understand; it is powerful.

"I got no further. The rains, coming from the sea, reached us. As the wall of the monsoon tipped out of the sky, the first huge flash of lightning lit up the figure of my boy Ezekiel, crouched over the bed, frozen in mid-stab; then, as if suddenly deflated, he crumpled and fell. I rushed forward with the cord from my habit, to bind him; but when I reached him he was already dead. From the top of his head projected an iron nail: the most dreadful condign punishment known to the Urhobo people, reserved for murderers, rapists, and those who had profaned the ceremonies of *egwugwu*."

Apart from one cicada, it was very still on the verandah. The drumming from Okpari village had ceased; it had grown late. The moon was up, but the spinney was still in shadow.

Immersed in the story, we had long forgotten our beer. It stood beside us, now warm.

"I don't expect you to be very impressed by the ending of my story," said Father Flynn. "You'll say, no doubt, 'Oh, was that all your ghost turned out to be? One African steward, fallen foul of local beliefs, driven crazy by a nail in his head, returning in his dying moments to take revenge on the man his clouded mind blamed for his misfortune.' But that was how it turned out.

"There's just one uncomfortable thing though," he went on, swallowing his warm beer with all the stoicism of his Order. "You see, when I called the police and we got the nail out of Ezekiel's head we found it was six

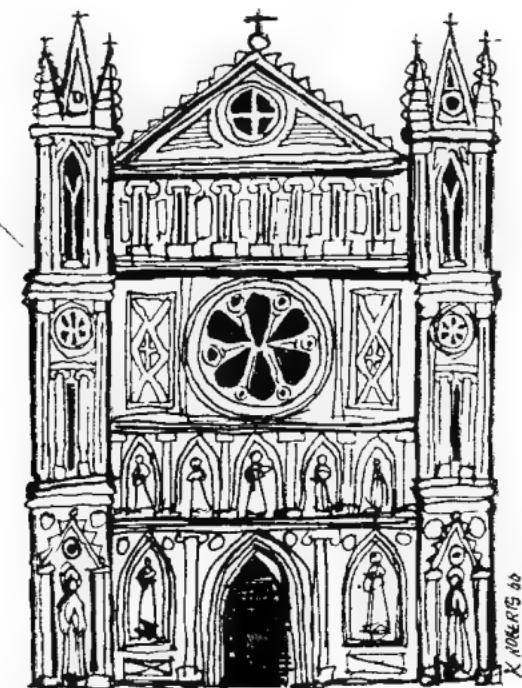
inches long. It must have killed him instantly. And as it happened we discovered later where he'd been caught. Someone saw him being dragged off into a compound, screaming out, here in Ughelli."

He got to his feet, and drew his robes about him. "Whatever it was that came into my bedroom had walked twenty-six miles through the bush with a six-inch nail driven into its head," he said. "And it had been dead some considerable time." There was no possible reply to be made. I watched him in silence as he went down the steps to his car.

Suddenly, it seemed very cold. . . .

— CHRIS HEBRON

*Here is a poignant little tale by a writer who is a past master of the atmospheric. With deft touches, Mr. Aldiss builds a picture of a world hauntingly different from the world we know, and outlines the mental torment of the strange man who calls himself Charteris . . .*



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**BRIAN W. ALDISS**

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# **JUST PASSING THROUGH**

COLIN CHARTERIS CLIMBED out of his red Banshee, stood for a moment stretching by it. The machine creaked and snapped, the metal cooling after its long duel across the motorways of Europe. Charteris took off his inflatable padded lifesuit, flung it into the back of the car, turned up the temperature of his one-piece to compensate for what

felt like near-nudity. Hero: he had covered the twenty-two hundred kilometres from Catanzaro down on the Ionian Sea to Metoz, France, in twenty-four hours' driving, and had sustained no more than a metre-long gouge along the front outside fender.

Outside Milano, where the triple autostrada made of the Lombardy plain a geometrical diagram, he had narrowly avoided a multiple crash. They were all multiple crashes these days. The image continued to multiply itself over and over in his mind, like a series of cultures in their dishes: a wheel still madly spinning, crushed barriers, buckled metal, sunlight worn like thick make-up over the impossibly abandoned attitudes of death. Charteris had seen it happen, the fantastic speeds suddenly swallowed by car and human frames with the sloth of the super-quick, when anything too fast for retina register could spend forever spreading through the labyrinths of consciousness. By now, the bodies would all be packed neatly in hospital or mortuary. the autostrada gleaming in perfect action again, the death squads lolling at their wheels in the nearest rastplatz, reading paperbacks; but Charteris's little clicker-shutter mechanisms were still busy re-running the actual blossoming moment of impact.

He shook his head, dislodging nothing. He had parked beside Metoz cathedral. It was several centuries old, but built of a coarse yellow stone that made it, now prematurely floodlit in the early evening, look like a Victorian copy of an earlier model.

The ground fell steeply at the other end of the square. Stone steps led down to a narrow street, all wall on one side and on the other prim little drab narrow façades closing all their shutters against the overwhelming statement of the cathedral.

Across one of the façades, a sign said, "Hotel des Invalides".

"Krankenhaus," Charteris said.

He pulled his suitcase out of the boot of the Banshee and dragged himself over to the hotel, walking like a warrior coming across a desert, a pilot walking over a runway after a mission. He emphasised the tragedy of it slightly, even grunting as he walked. The other cars parked in the square were a shabby bunch. Removing

his gaze from his own egotistical landscapes, he saw this part of the cathedral square had been bought up as a used car lot. There were prices in francs painted to one side of each windscreen, as if denoting the worth of the driver rather than the vehicle.

The Hotel des Invalides had a brass handle to its door. Charteris dragged it down and stepped into the hall, into unmitigated shadow. A bell buzzed and burned insatiably until he closed the door behind him. He walked up the corridor, and only with that motion did the hall take on existence. There was a pot plant dying here beside an enormous piece of furniture—or it could be an over-elaborate doorway into a separate part of the establishment. On the walls, enormous pictures of blue-clad men being blown up among scattering sandbags. A small dense black square figure emerged at the end of the passage. He drew near and saw it had permed hair and was a woman, not young, not old, smiling.

*“Haben Sie ein Zimmer? Ein personn, eine Nacht?”*

*“Jahr, jahr. Mit eine Dusche oder ohne?”*

*“Ohne.”*

*“Zimmer Nummer Zwanzig, Monsieur.”*

German. The *lingua franca* of Europe.

The madame called for a dark-haired girl, who came hurrying and smiling with the key to room twenty. She led Charteris up three flights of stairs, the first flight marble, the second and third wooden, the third uncarpeted. Each landing was adorned with large pictures of Frenchmen dying or conquering Germans in the first world war.

“This is where it all began,” he said to the back of the girl.

She paused and looked down at him. *“Je ne comprends pas, M’sieur.”*

No windows had been opened for a long while. The air smelt of all the bottled lives that had suffered here. Constriction, miserliness, conservation over all. He saw the red limbs leaping again as if for joy within the bucketing autostrada cars. If there were only the two alternatives, he preferred the leaping death to the desiccating life. He knew how greatly he dreaded both, how his fantasy life

shuttled between them. *One more deadly mission: blast Peking, or spend ten years in the hotel in Metoz.*

He was panting on the threshold of Zimmer Twenty. By opening his mouth, he did so without the girl hearing him. She was—he was getting to that age when he could no longer tell—eighteen, twenty, twenty-two? Pretty enough.

Motioning to her to stay, Charteris crossed to the first of two tall windows. He worked at the bar until it gave way and the two halves swung into the room.

Great drop on this, the back of the hotel. In the street below, two kids with a white dog on a lead. They looked up at him, becoming merely two faces with fat arms and hands. Thalidomites. He could not shut away the images of ruin and deformity.

Buildings the other side of the alley. A woman moving in a room, just discerned through curtains. A waste site, two cats stalking each other among litter. A dry canal bed, full of waste and old cans. Wasn't there also a crushed automobile? A notice scrawled large on a ruined wall: **NEUTRAL FRANCE THE ONLY FRANCE**. Certainly, they had managed to preserve their neutrality to the bitter end; the French experience in the two previous world wars had encouraged that. Beyond the wall, a tree-lined street far wider than necessary, and the Prefecture. One policeman visible.

Turning back, Charteris cast a perfunctory eye over the furnishings of the room. They were all horrible. The bed was specially designed for chastity and early rising.

*"Combien?"*

The girl told him. Two thousand six hundred and fifty francs. He had to have the figure repeated. His French was rusty and he was not used to the French government's recent devaluation.

*"I'll take it. Are you from Metoz?"*

*"I'm Italian."*

Pleasure rose in him, a sudden feeling of gratitude that not all good things had been eroded. In this rotten stuffy room, it was as if he breathed again the air of the mountains.

*"I've been living in Italy since the war, right down in Catanzaro,"* he told her in Italian.

She smiled. "I am from the south, from Calabria, from a little village in the mountains that you won't have heard of."

"Tell me, I might have done. I was doing NUNSACS work down there. I got about."

She told him the name of the village and he had not heard of it. They laughed.

"But I have not heard of NUNSACS," she said. "It is a Calabrian town? No?"

He laughed again, chiefly for the pleasure of doing it and seeing its effect on her. "NUNSACS is a New United Nations organisation for settling and if possible rehabilitating war victims. We have several large encampments down along the Ionian Sea."

The girl was not listening to what he said. "You speak Italian well but you aren't Italian. Are you German?"

"I'm Montenegrin—a Jugoslav. Haven't been home since I was a boy. Now I'm driving over to England."

As he spoke, he heard Madame calling impatiently. The girl moved towards the door, smiled at him—a sweet and shadowy smile that seemed to explain her existence—and was gone.

Charteris put his case down on the table under the window. He stood looking out for a long while at the dry canal bed, the detritus in it making it look like an archaeological dig that had uncovered remains of an earlier industrial civilization.

Madame was working in the bar when he went down. Several of the little tables in the room were occupied. He could tell at a glance they were all local people. The room was large and dispiriting, the big dark wood bar on one side being dwarfed and somehow divorced from the functions it was supposed to serve. A television set flickered in one corner, most of those present contriving to sit and drink so that they kept an eye on it, as if it were an enemy or at least an uncertain friend. The only exceptions to this were two old men at a table set apart, who talked industriously, resting their wrists on the table but using their hands to emphasise points in the conversation. One of these men, who grew a tiny puff of beard under his lower lip, soon revealed himself as M'sieur.

Behind M'sieur's table, and set in one corner by a

radiator, was a bigger table, a solemn table, spread with various articles of secretarial and other use. This was Madame's table, and to this she retired to work with some figures when she was not serving her customers. Tied to the radiator was a large and mangy young dog, who whined at intervals and flopped continually into new positions, as though the floor had been painted with anti-dog powder. Madame occasionally spoke mildly to it, but her interests were clearly elsewhere.

All this Charteris took in as he sat at a table against the wall, sipping a pernod, waiting for the girl to appear. He saw these people as victims of an unworkable capitalistic system dying on its feet. The girl came after some while from an errand in the back regions, and he motioned her over to his table.

"What's your name?"

"Angelina."

"Mine's Charteris. That's what I call myself. It's an English name. I'd like to take you out for a meal."

"I don't leave here till late—ten o'clock."

"Then you don't sleep here?"

Some of the softness went out of her face as caution, even craftiness, overcame her, so that momentarily he thought, she's just another lay, but there will be endless complications to it in this set-up, you can bet! She said, "Can you buy some cigarettes or something? I know they're watching me."

He shrugged. She walked across to the bar. Charteris watched the movement of her legs, the action of her buttocks, trying to estimate whether her knickers would be clean or not. He was a fastidious man. Angelina fetched down a packet of cigarettes, put them on a tray, and carried them across to him. He took them and paid without a word. All the while, the M'sieur's eyes were on him.

Charteris forced himself to smoke one of the cigarettes. They were vile. Despite her neutrality in the Acid Head War, France had suffered from shortages like everyone else. Charteris was pampered, with illegal access to NUNSACS cigars, which he enjoyed.

He looked at the television. Faces swam in the green light, talking too fast for him to follow. There was some nonsense about a cycling champion, a protracted item

about a military parade and inspection, shots of international film stars dining in Paris, something about a murder hunt somewhere. Not a mention of the two continents full of nut cases who no longer knew where reality began or ended. The French carried their neutrality into every facet of their lives.

When he had finished his pernod, he went over and paid Madame at her table and walked out in the square.

It was night, night in its early stages when the clouds still carried hints of daylight through the upper air. The floodlighting was gaining on the cathedral, chopping it into alternate vertical sections of void and glitter, so that it looked like a cage for some gigantic prehistoric bird. Beyond the cage, the traffic on the motorway snarled untiringly.

He went and sat in his car and smoked a cigar to remove the taste of the cigarette, although sitting in the Banshee when it was still made him oddly uneasy. He thought about Angelina and whether he wanted her, decided on the whole he did not. He wanted English girls. He had never even known one but, since his earliest days, he had longed for all things English, as another man he knew yearned for anything Chinese. He had dropped his Montenegrin name to christen himself with the surname of his favourite English writer.

About the present state of England, he imagined he had no illusions. When the Acid Head War broke out between the U.S. and China, Russia had come in on the Communist side. Canada and Australia had aligned themselves with America, and Britain—perhaps still nourishing dreams of a grander past—had backed into the war in such a way as to offend her allies while at the same time involving most of the other European nations, Germany, Italy, and Scandinavia amongst them—and France always excluded. By an irony, Britain had been the first country to suffer the PCA Bomb—the Psycho-Chemical Aerosols that spread hallucinatory mental states across the nation. As a NUNSACS official, Charteris was being posted to work in Britain on rehabilitation work; as a NUNSACS official, he knew the terrifying disorder he would find there. He had no qualms about it.

But first there was this evening to be got through . . .

He had said that so often to himself. Life was so short, one treasured it so intensely, and yet it was also full of desolating boredom. The acid head victims all over the world had no problems with boredom; their madnesses precluded it; they were always well occupied with terror or joy, whichever their inner promptings led them to; that was why one envied the victims one spent one's life trying to save. The victims were never tired of themselves.

The cigar tasted good, extending its mildness all round him like a mist. Now he put it out and climbed from the car. He knew of only two ways to pass the evening before it was time to sleep; he could eat or he could find sexual companionship. Sex, he thought, the mysticism of materialism. It was true. He sometimes needed desperately the sense of a female life impinging on his with its unexplored avenues and possibilities, so stale, so explored, were his own few reactions. Back to his mind again came the riotous movements of the autostrada victims, fornicating with death.

On his way towards a lighted restaurant on the far side of the square, he saw another method by which to structure the congealing time of the French evening. The little cinema was showing a film called **SEX ET BANG-BANG**, forbidden to anyone under sixteen. He glanced up at the ill-painted poster, showing a near-naked blonde with an ugly shadow like a moustache across her face, and muttered, "Starring Petula Roualt as Al Capone," as he passed.

As he ate in the restaurant, he thought about Angelina and madness and war and neutrality; it seemed to him they were all products of different time-senses. Perhaps there were no human emotions, only a series of different synchronicity microstructures, so that one "had time for" one thing or another. He suddenly stopped eating. He saw the world—Europe, that is, precious, hated Europe that was his stage—purely as a fabrication of time, no matter involved. Matter was an hallucinatory experience, merely a slow-motion perceptual experience of certain time/emotion nodes passing through the brain. No, that the brain seized on in turn as it moved round the perceptual web it had spun, would spin, from childhood on. Metoz, that he apparently perceived so clearly through all his

senses, was there only because all his senses had reached a certain dynamic synchronicity in their obscure journey about the biochemical web. Tomorrow, responding to some obscure circadian rhythm, they would achieve another relationship, and he would appear to move on. Matter was an abstraction of the time syndrome, much as the television had enabled Charteris to deduce bicycle races and military parades which held, for him, even less substance than the flickering screen. Matter was hallucination.

Charteris sat unmoving. If it were so, then clearly he was not at this restaurant table. Clearly there was no plate of cooling veal before him. Clearly Metoz did not exist. The autostrada was a projection of temporal confluences within him, perhaps a riverine dialogue of his entire life. France? Earth? Where was he? What was he?

Terrible though the answer was, it seemed unassailable. The man he called Charteris was merely another manifestation of a time/emotion node with no more reality than the restaurant or the autostrada. Only the perceptual web itself was "real". "He" was the web in which Charteris, Metoz, tortured Europe, the stricken continents of Asia and America, could have their being, their doubtful being. He was God. . . .

Someone was speaking to him. Dimly, distantly, he became aware of a waiter asking if he could take his plate away. So the waiter must be the Dark One, trying to disrupt his Kingdom. He waved the man off, saying something vaguely—much later, he realised he had spoken in Serbian, his native tongue, which he never used.

The restaurant was closing. Flinging some francs down on the table, he staggered out into the night, and slowly came to himself in the open air.

He was shaking from the strength and terror of his vision. As he rested against a rotting stone wall, its texture patterning his fingers, he heard the cathedral clock begin to chime and counted automatically. It was ten o'clock by whatever time-level they used here. He had passed two hours in some sort of trance.

In the camp outside Catenzano, NUNSACS housed ten thousand men and women. Most of them were Russian,

most had been brought from one small district of the U.S.S.R. Charteris had got his job on the rehabilitation staff by virtue of his fluent Russian, which was in many respects almost identical with his native tongue.

The ten thousand caused little trouble. Almost all of them were confined within the tiny republics of their own psyches. The PCA Bombs had been ideal weapons. The psychodelic drugs used by both sides were tasteless, odourless, colourless, and hence virtually undetectable. They were cheaply made. They were equally effective whether inhaled, drunk, or filtered through the pores of the skin. They were enormously potent. The after-effects, dependent on size of dose, could last a lifetime.

So the ten thousand crawled about the camp, smiling, laughing, scowling, whispering, as bemused with themselves and their fellows as they had been directly after the bombing. Some recovered. Others over the months revealed depressing character changes.

The drugs passed through the human system unimpaired in strength. Human wastes had to be rigorously collected—in itself a considerable undertaking among people no longer responsible for their own actions—and subjected to rigorous processing before the complex psychochemical molecules could be broken down. Inevitably, some of the NUNSACS staff picked up the contagion.

And I, thought Charteris, I with that sad and lovely Natrina . . .

I am going psychodelic. That vision must have come from the drug.

He had moved some way towards the Hotel des Invalides, dragging his fingers across the rough faces of the buildings as if to convince himself that matter was still matter. When Angelina came up to him, he scarcely recognised her.

“You were waiting for me,” she said accusingly. “You are deliberately waylaying me. You’d better go to your room before Madame locks up.”

“I—I may be ill! You must help me.”

“Speak Italian. I told you, I don’t understand German.”

“Help me, Angelina. I must be ill.”

“You were well enough before.”

"I swear . . . I had a vision. I can't face my room. I don't want to be alone. Let me come back to your room!"

"Oh no! You must think I am a fool, Signor!"

He pulled himself together.

"Look, I'm ill, I think. Come and sit in my car with me for ten minutes. I need to get my strength back. If you don't trust me, I'll smoke a cigar all the time. You never knew a man kiss a pretty girl with a cigar in his mouth, did you?"

They sat in the car, she beside him looking at him rather anxiously. Charteris could see her eyes gleam in the thick orange light—the very hue of time congealed!—bouncing off the walls of the cathedral. He sucked the rich sharp smoke down into his being, trying to fumigate it against the terrible visions of his psyche.

"I'm going back to Italy soon," she said. "Now the war's over, I may work in Milano. My uncle writes that it's booming there again now. Is that so?"

"Booming." A very curious word. Not blooming, not boozing. Booming.

"Really, I'm not Italian. Not by ancestry. Everyone in our village is descended from Albanians. When the Turks invaded Albania five centuries ago, many Albanians fled in ships across to the south of Italy to start life anew. The old customs were preserved from generation to generation. Did you hear of such a thing in Catenzaro?"

"No." In Catenzaro he had heard the legends and phobias of the Caucasus, chopped and distorted by the kaleidoscopes of hallucination. It was a Slav, and not a Latin, purgatory of alienation.

"As a little girl, I was bilingual. We spoke Squiptar in the home and Italian everywhere else. Now I can hardly remember one word of Squiptar! My uncles have all forgotten too. Only my old aunt, who is also called Angelina, remembers. It's sad, isn't it, not to recall the language of your childhood? Like an exile?"

"Oh, shut up! To hell with it!"

By that, she was reassured. Perhaps she believed that a man who took so little care to please could not want to rape her. Perhaps she was right. While Charteris nursed his head and tried to understand what was inside it, she chattered on a new tack.

"I'll go back to Milano in the autumn, in September when it's not so hot. They're not good Catholics here. Are you a good Catholic? The French priests—ugh, I don't like them, the way they look at you! Sometimes I hardly seem to believe any more . . . Do you believe in God, Signor?"

He turned and looked painfully at her orange eyes, trying to see what she was really saying. She was a terrible bore, this girl.

"If you are really interested, I believe we each have Gods within us, and we must follow those."

"That's stupid! Those gods would just be reflections of ourselves and we should be indulging in egotism."

He was surprised by her answer. Neither his Italian nor his theology was good enough for him to reply as he would have liked. He said briefly, "And your god—he is just an externalisation of egotism. Better to keep it inside!"

"What terrible, wicked blasphemy for a Catholic to utter!"

"You little idiot, I'm no Catholic! I'm a Communist. I've never seen any sign of your God marching about the world."

"Then you are indeed sick!"

Laughing angrily, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards him. As she struggled, he shouted, "Let's make a little investigation!"

She brought her skull forward and struck him on the nose. His head seemed to turn cathedral-size on the instant, flood-lit with pain. He hardly realised she had broken from his grip and was running across the square, leaving the Banshee's passenger door swinging open.

After a minute or two, Charteris locked the car door, climbed out, and made his way across to the hotel. The door was locked; Madame would be in bed, dreaming dreams of locked chests. Looking through the window into the bar, he saw that M'sieur still sat at his special table, drinking wine with a crony. Madame's wretched dog sprawled by the radiator, still restlessly changing its position. Charteris tapped on the window.

After a minute or two, M'sieur unlocked the door from inside and appeared in his shirtsleeves. He stroked his

tiny puff of beard and nodded to himself, as if something significant had been confirmed.

"You were fortunate I was still up, M'sieur. Madame my wife does not like to be disturbed when once she has locked up the premises. My friend and I were just fighting some of our old campaigns before bed."

"Perhaps I have been doing the same thing."

He went up to his room. It was filled with noise. As he walked over to the window and looked out, he saw that a lock on the dry canal had been opened. Now it was full of rushing water, coursing over the car body and other rubbish, slowly moving them downstream. All the long uncomfortable night, Charteris slept uneasily to the noise of the purging water.

In the morning, he rose early, drank Madame's first indifferent coffee of the day, and paid his bill. His head was clear, but the world seemed less substantial than it had been. Carting his bag out to the car, he dressed himself in his lifesuit, inflated it, strapped himself in, and drove round the cathedral onto the motorway, which was already roaring with traffic. He headed towards the coast, leaving Metoz behind at a gradually increasing speed.

— BRIAN W. ALDISS

*There was a brooding calm about the bay. Only the gathering of clouds, the slow approach of the sea, hinted at what was to come . . . A brilliant and evocative fantasy by a powerful new writer.*

# INCONSTANCY

by Brian M. Stableford

The gulls drifted on the air currents like great grey hoverflies, or flapped in spirals around the battlements of the sheer cliff. They called as they soared and sank, plunging to the sand to welcome the lone figure crossing the beach. Sometimes he would wave and throw them pieces of fish, but today he merely walked and watched their aerial ballet. In flocks they swooped over the angular grey edifices that had once been a village—now almost immersed at high tide, more every month, and more each time the weather increased in moodiness. Soon it would be below the breakers, and an unlimited source of littoral prey for the gulls would disappear. The sun sparkled the surface of the sea and warmed their feathers as they caught and used the wind.

Cay walked laboriously over the soft, clammy sand, his eyes flitting from the gulls, to the dead village, and to the ever-advancing sea. He scanned the sand, and his eyes were arrested by a line of footprints in the drier, more solid ground above the tide-line. He hesitated in his purposeful march, then changed direction to investigate the footprints.

He knelt beside them, and his hand spanned their length. Small—a woman's, he thought. And a correspondingly small stride—definitely a woman's or a child's—and yet. His face showed his puzzlement as he vaguely fought the possibilities arising from the marks. They headed, he

saw, towards the northern promontory of the towering sandstone cliffs.

He stirred the sand with his fingers, then wiped them on his jacket, a pensive look on his face. He stood up abruptly, and continued his walk toward the partly submerged village. How soon would it be completely covered? Five months, perhaps, at the present relatively lethargic rate, until the high tides washed over the ultimate building. But turbulence in the weather radically affected the speed of the advance. A storm some four weeks ago—a warning of the more violent summer storms to come—and since then the sea never retreated beyond the old high tide mark. Why? How could an ocean shift so far in a single night? These were transitory days. The summer storms would come soon. Perhaps this year would see the whole bay gone, perhaps the sea would swing back, pendulum fashion, to its old position. Cay halted suddenly at the disturbing thought—what indeed if the sea should come even to the great cliffs? His home would be drowned, and there was no way out.

Cay's mind sheered away from the thought, as it always had, and it required an effort of will to maintain it with his thoughts. No way out . . . no way in? He screwed his face up; but the logic evaded him, his memory held no answer.

He climbed over the rubble of several flimsy cottages, supporting himself with the fingers of his right hand. He reached the buildings that were yet intact and unconquered by the tides. A group of them were constructed of solid granite—unbothered by the lashing sea winds and the storms. Cay did not bother to wonder from where the granite had come; that problem had been forgotten unresolved. Neither did he ask himself what function such buildings could ever have served when the village was alive. They were square, some twenty yards to a side, and two-storied; that in itself was uncommon save in storage houses. Inside they were furnished, apparently untouched by looters, and furnished almost palatially. Cay thought they were relics from an age before the village; but he could not have offered evidence, save that they simply did not fit. Inside, there were four rooms on each floor, each storey being divided into quarters. The division was

precise—too precise, thought Clay, to be aesthetically pleasing.

Cay came to the door of one of these buildings. It was set geometrically central in one wall. This regularity dismayed Cay, for it was practically the only geometrical exactness in the inlet. Nature abhors geometrical precision without her own symmetry, and Cay was very much a son to Nature.

He entered, crossed to the staircase and ascended. A woman waited at the head of the stairs. She was dressed in simple jacket and skirt. Her age was difficult to assess; she might have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty-five. Her face was delicate in its lines but seemed frozen, like a sculptor's creation rather than that of a human. Cay joined her, nodding a greeting, and together they crossed the room to the small window.

Cay pointed to the beach, where the line of his own footprints detoured to a point obscured by the crumbling outskirts of the village.

"There's a line of footprints across the upper beach, going to the northern promontory."

"Not yours?" asked the woman, showing no hint of surprise or puzzlement.

"A woman's. I don't suppose . . .?" Cay left the question hanging, and there was a pause before it was answered.

"I never leave the village. You know that. I never leave this building, even."

"You'll have to soon. The summer storms might bring the sea right up. What will you do then?" asked Cay.

"Suppose the sea comes right up to your hut," she countered. "All the way up to the cliffs—what will *you* do?"

Cay was silent for a moment. "I don't know."

"No more do I. Save that I will not leave this house."

"House?" questioned Cay. For an instant, the woman's face may have showed a hint of bewilderment. Cay focused his attention, screwing down his superfluous mind and forcing lines of concentration into his face. "If there is no way out, how did we get here? This is a house only because you live in it. What was it? Why

is it intact?" Cay's face cleared. The woman considered for a moment.

"You have been here too long, Cay. Details are beginning to bother you."

"How did the other one get in?" asked Cay suddenly.

"Who knows? Perhaps you can ask, but don't expect an answer. How did you get here? How did I?"

"I don't know," protested Cay. "Yet I know north and south, I know the cliffs are sandstone, and this house granite. I know words and their meaning. Why don't I know how I got here?"

The woman stared at the citadel-like cliffs. "Did we come from beyond the cliffs?" she wondered. "I cannot remember—but I do not care." Cay looked up, running his eyes along the jagged tooth-edges of the rock, like spears projecting above a phalanx of shields, and the gulls wheeling around them. His attention was drawn to two wheeling dots, almost lost in the bright blue backcloth.

"Hawks," he stated briefly. The woman's eyes had dropped to the razed buildings. Now they lifted again. "Where?"

"There," said Cay, pointing. "Two, high, above and to the left of the grand pinnacle."

"Strange," murmured the woman idly. "How long is it since there were last hawks over the bay?"

Cay turned, surprised. "There have never been hawks in the bay. Just the gulls around the cliffs."

"And the seals," said the woman, waving a hand in the direction of three black spots bobbing in the blue water.

"And the seals," conceded Cay. "Things are changing again."

"Things always change. The sea changes, the winds are sudden and brief. The rain and the mist alternate with the sun without mediants. Only the sun is constant."

Cay turned from the window with sudden decision.

"I am going to see whoever made the footprints." The other did not turn. "You don't mind if I go?" asked Cay. The woman was silent. Cay began to descend the staircase. Then he halted.

"What is your name?" he asked. "It will be needed now—now there are two."

"Marte." she answered without turning.

The second woman was neatly dressed in a long skirt and decorated jacket. She was young—much younger than Marte, though not as young as Cay. She sat on a large boulder, squinting up into the deep blueness.

"What are you looking at?" asked Clay, who had approached unobserved. She turned quickly, her eyes wide and her mouth open, striking a sharp contrast with the mask-like face of Marte.

"I was watching the gulls," she answered. "I didn't know anyone else was here. Is that your home?" She pointed vaguely in the direction of the southern promontory, where Cay's hut was visible against the yellow lichenized rock of the cliff wall. He nodded, and sat on a slab of rock facing the newcomer.

"Cay is my name," he stated trivially. The other's eyes lifted. She searched her memory, the process betraying itself in her features. "Mine is Damalis," she said after a while, apparently having composed the name herself. Cay was silent, uncertain where to go next.

"How did you come here?" he asked finally.

"How?" she repeated uncomfortably.

"Yes," persisted Cay. "How did you get into the bay?"  
"I can't remember."

"But that's impossible!" protested Cay. "You only came here this morning—or last night."

"I don't know," she said, gesturing as though to indicate that there was no reason why she should know. "Neither do I," said Cay, shaking his head slowly. There was another pause. Cay was unsure of his ground. With Marte, he had always known exactly where he stood. Familiarity, he thought, had pressed her into an exact mould, whereas this new woman was an unknown quantity. Things were changing again.

"Things always change," commented Damalis, looking sharply at Cay, who realised that he had spoken aloud. Odd, he thought, that she should respond to the remark in precisely the same fashion as Marte, who had hitherto seemed her opposite in every way. Cay followed her eyes, which were once more directed at the gulls wheeling around the cliff face.

"Beautiful," he said. The woman looked at him in surprise, cocked her head and said, "I don't think so."

"The gulls," said Cay, "are the epitome of grace. What must it be like to hover and glide as they do, to fall and flap along the wave crests? To soar on those crescent-bowed wings and float on the breezes? And to bob on the waves with folded wings?" He stopped, turned to the woman, flushing with discomfort.

"No," she said, "There are the pictures of grace and beauty. More powerful, too, than the gulls. I can not only admire them, I can identify with them."

"The hawks," said Cay dryly. "They are new too. Did you bring them?"

She looked up in surprise. "I?"

"From wherever you came from. Perhaps they brought you."

Cay subsided, astonished at his words. The woman was plainly out of her depth in trying to follow the conversation.

"Where do you intend to live now that you are here?" he asked, to change the subject.

"I don't know. Is there room in the village by the sea?"

"Yes. Another woman lives there—in one of the strange, square buildings, which are habitable."

"Indeed?" remarked Damalis. "How convenient."

A shadow passed across Cay's face. "Yes," he murmured, chasing a half-formed thought without success.

"How long will you stay?" asked Cay. Damalis' face clouded once again. "I don't know," she replied. Cay frowned. Nobody knew, it seemed.

The next morning, the remains of a dead gull decorated the damp sand. Cay looked up at the two black specks, high in the infinite blue.

"Where are its grace and its beauty now?" asked Damalis, an odd note of triumph in her voice. Cay turned.

"Gone," he said dryly.

"The hawks have to eat," she said lightly. Her levity and yet-impeccable neatness annoyed Cay somehow. Like the hawks, he thought.

"So do the gulls," he said, "Do you see any dead hawks?"

Damalis was silent, her repartee apparently exhausted. Cay idly stirred the corpse with his boot, staring out to sea, where a lone seal ducked and weaved among the waves.

"Your friend is odd," commented Damalis, more to break the silence than to make conversation.

"Very," agreed Cay. "She is solitary. I don't think she enjoys my presence in the bay. She's always so curt. She tolerates me because I like company, but . . ." He shrugged.

"Does she never leave that building?"

"No. Soon, though, she must—or die. The sea advances more each day. At its present rate, it will take perhaps five months, but the summer storms are coming."

"And the storms affect its advance?" she asked. Cay nodded. "Perhaps," he said.

"Nothing is constant," mused Damalis, almost with sigh.

Marte was looking out of the window when Cay arrived, staring out to sea. He joined her.

"Where are the seals?" he asked. The surface of the sea was featureless—the black bobbing head was gone. She shrugged.

"Marte . . ." he said, using the name for the first time, "can you remember anything of where you were before here?"

The woman shook her head, still staring directly out to the featureless sea.

"Or what will happen to us if the storms drive the sea up the beach?"

"We may die," said Marte slowly. "But I think it is likely that we shall be somewhere else, like here, but with no memory of here. This is a world of change. It is difficult to think about such things, because the subject has no basis in our memories. We *are*, and it is hard to ask why." She turned and looked at him, her face maintaining its perfect and emotionless mask. Cay felt uncomfortable under the steady gaze.

"How do you know that *those* are *gulls*, and that is *the sea*, and *there* is *the sky*?"

"I know," she stated simply. "Cay, you question the very

foundation of our existence. When change is so rapid, and so fickle, the mere fact of existence is enough. To question 'why?' is irrelevant when 'how' is tenuous and transient."

Cay thought for a moment, started to speak, and then subsided again. Then the words came, rapidly but deliberately.

"For you, perhaps that is so. For you, the bare fact that *you are* may be enough. But *you do not live in this world of change* you speak about. You live within yourself. Only in the chrysalis of your own, personal existence are these questions unimportant or insoluble. You live in a single room of a single building, and refuse to leave, yet you can criticize my interest in the world outside your little micro-cosm. Is this just, Marte?"

Her face showed nothing. She was staring out to sea again, her pupils small in the bright light, fixed on an imaginary point far beyond the sea. Cay rose from the window ledge and walked to the stairhead, throwing back one last comment.

"The summer storms are coming."

In the days which followed, the three led an uneasy co-existence. Marte maintained her cocoon of indifference and complacency. Cay did not visit her, nor did he seek Damalis' company. The shadow of the storms was visible as silver cloud streaks on the horizon, and he was worried. Damalis' behaviour was that of a restrained nomad; she explored every nook and cranny of the cliff wall, collected shells from the tide line, and examined the weed-festooned buildings of the lower village at low tide. Occasionally she would come upon Cay, and tell him facts he already knew, to make conversation he did not want. Another might have accepted this solicitation for affection, but Cay disliked Damalis for reasons he could not pin down. It was as though a submerged memory kept coming up for brief instants in warning; a memory and a warning he could never catch.

And then came the first of the storms.

The first Cay knew of the storm was the banging of pieces of driftwood as the wind caught his woodstack, leant against the cliff, and hurled the spars at the hut.

He went outside, into the premature dimness and the pungency of the atmosphere. The sea was restless, heaving and foaming in the whistling wind. The rain came, as he knew it would, in great drops that soaked wherever they hit, and drew a hissing cacophony from the eroded boulders at the cliff base. They stung in their profusion, and Cay retreated within the door of his hut to watch the inevitable charge of the sea as it dashed forward, whipped on by the almost visible charioteers of wind and storm. Lightning flashed sporadically and vividly, followed by intervals of deafening thunder, like mighty pealing bells.

The sea retreated, hauled back by a hand of incredible and intangible power; then came a second surge. It was not excessive—barely above the spring tide mark—but it persisted. The invisible force which had pulled back the sea on its first advance was gone. And this was but the first storm. He shut the door against the rain, barring it in case it should be blown off its hinges in the assault. He sat, and thought, and worried, oddly enough about Damalis. Marte he had discounted as doomed; surely no one so self-entombed could survive in a hostile environment.

He picked up a few pieces of smoked fish and began to eat, slowly. Why? he wondered. Why eat? Where does the food come from? The sea, obviously. After all, he thought, what do the gulls feed on but fish and shellfish? A phrase came into his head—“manna from heaven”; but it was unfamiliar as far as he knew, and he had not the words to interpret it. Still, it was odd. He had watched fish from the rocks along the promontories—they were fast and agile. Yet he caught them with nets easily.

Cay shook his head slowly. Marte would neither know the answers, nor care—Marte did not care enough to catch her own fish. Could she? He supposed so. After all, there must have been a time when she was alone—she had been here when he arrived. Perhaps there had been others then. The storm rattled the hut, and Cay threw himself full length on the bed. It sagged in the middle. The sag had been there as long as Cay had used it. Had it been made that way, or had others before him used it? The hut had been very convenient when he first arrived—almost as convenient as the granite buildings in the village which were similarly equipped.

Cay went to sleep. His mind was confused, and ill-equipped for reason.

The next morning he ran to the village even before seeing which of his nets had survived the storm. All were usually well sheltered, but this was the morning after the first violent storm of the summer, and some might have been worn during the winter.

The storm had washed the sea into the lower storeys of the granite buildings, but the upper ones were untouched save for spray and the wind.

There were five seals out to sea, the cawing gulls swooped low over the ruins, and high in the sky were the ever-present hawks.

Marte was unhurt and unruffled as ever. Cay stayed only briefly to make sure she was alive and healthy. Damalis was somewhat worse off. She squirmed in damp clothing like a bird raising its feathers, and was loud in her resentment and condemnation of the storm.

"What will you do now?" asked Cay.

"Get as far from the cursed sea as possible. From now on I share your hut." Cay had been half expecting this, but started nevertheless. "No," he said simply.

Damalis looked at him in open amazement. "No?" she repeated incredulously.

"At least," amended Cay, "not unless the next storm covers the village, and not the hut."

"Are you mad?" she asked, unbelieving still.

"Perhaps," stated Cay equivocally.

"But why?"

"I don't know," said Cay, more truthfully than not.

A week passed, without the watery sun shining for more than a brief period at a time. They waited for the next storm, Marte calmly, Damalis just the opposite and Cay curiously. Eight days after the first storm the sky darkened again, and Cay mentally predicted a big one. It rained a little in the late afternoon, but tentatively, and the clouds continued to gather.

Cay spent most of the day sitting on the broken walls of the semi-submerged buildings, watching the seals, the gulls and the turbulent sky; and two tiny dots that were hawks.

As the evening approached he lay supine on a rock slab, staring straight up into the sky.

"There's a storm coming," said Damalis' falsely casual voice.

"I know."

"I'm not staying in the village."

"No," stated Cay disinterestedly.

"I don't understand you," she said quietly.

"Nor I you. Do the hawks understand the gulls, or the seals the fish? Do you understand them?"

"Yes, I think I do. They are simple, their lives have no whys or hows. Their lives are to live, and nothing more. But you are closer than they—how is it I cannot understand you?"

"You are not closer to me," Cay contradicted. "You are farther from me than the gulls and seals and hawks are from each other. And does the hawk mate with the gull? You may stay the night in my hut. But that is all." He was silent for a moment, then added, "I do not believe it will help you."

"You think it will be so bad?" she asked fearfully.

"I think that tonight the water will drown the bay."

"Why?" Cay laughed. "I mean, why do you think so?"

"The gulls are quiet on their nests. Even while we have been talking, the seals are gone, the hawks are gone. We are all alone—and only dead folk are alone."

Damalis laughed then—quietly, and with genuine amusement. She did not explain her laughter. "So, this evening we are dead?" she asked.

"I think so," agreed Cay. "Or perhaps not." Damalis frowned. "Tomorrow," continued Cay, "this bay will be underwater—the village will be drowned, and my hut smashed by the breakers. Where shall we be? I don't know. I probably never will—because I won't remember."

He fell silent, and his eyes closed.

"Your dreams are clever, Cay. Will you take them with you, or will they be left here with your memories?"

"Marte!" The mask-like face showed no emotion. Cay sat erect, abruptly.

"True," she said, leaning idly against the slab, "I said I would never leave the house. But things change. Things al-

ways change. It is one thing our bodies and minds are not adapted to."

"Aren't they?" asked Cay. Marte's eyebrows lifted perhaps a fraction of an inch.

"Dream on, Cay; perhaps your dreams will save you."

"What will save *you*?" asked Damalis.

"Nothing," replied the older woman. "I shall accept what comes."

"I shall go with Cay," said Damalis decisively.

"You will go nowhere with me," broke in Cay. "You may stay in the hut; but when the wall of water comes, you go your way, not mine."

"Perhaps," said Damalis. Marte nodded and set off along the uneven ground, picking her way between the sea-washed debris and the rubble of fallen homes.

Quietly, with a bare whisper as drops flecked the rock, it began to rain.

They watched from their wooden shelter as the storm began to unleash itself. They watched silently as the rain-drops fell; as yellow streaked the sky, as the sea swelled, sullen and sticky. There was little wind—bits flew in from many directions and swirled the rain in little aerial eddies. Up above, however, it was different. Black clouds like oily smoke hastened their way directly from the sea.

The sea itself bulged like a massive blister, ugly and scarred with spindrift.

She put her hand on his arm, and he dragged it away. She was scared, and persisted, clutching him above the elbow. He shoved her away, out through the doorway into the storm. She made as though to return but, almost unconsciously, he moved to bar her way, his mesmerized eyes never leaving the great grey hulk massing for the advance.

Suddenly she turned, and began to walk down the beach. The blister suddenly burst, and the sea came forward. Then she was running, and he ran after her. The rain stung his eyes, the lightning blinded him. He staggered, fell, and lost sight of her. He rose quickly, but there was only a hawk winging for the shelter of the cliff pinnacles.

"I'm sorry!" The call was drowned in the callous hiss of rain, buried in the heavy air.

The water swept in, a mighty concave wall of viscous

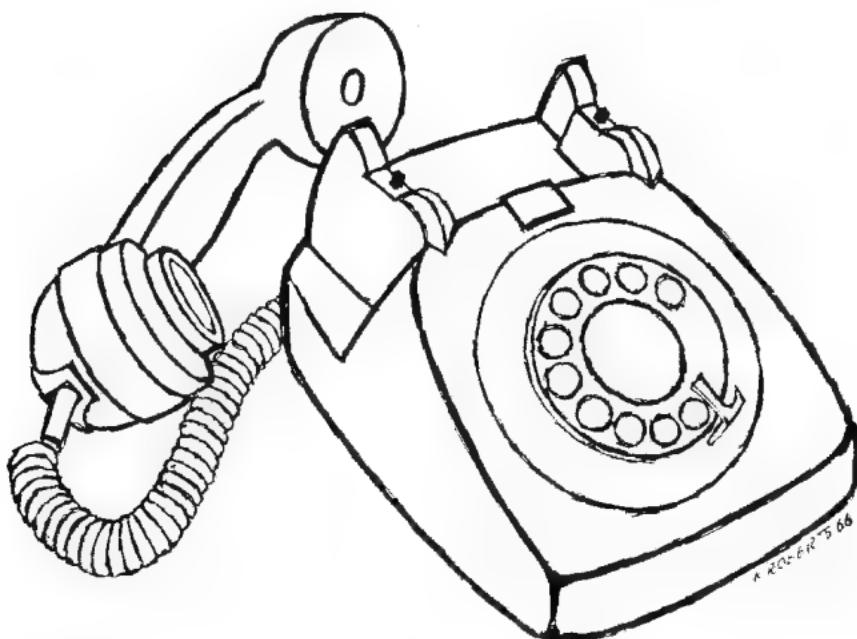
ocean. A black dot surfaced in the turmoil, to be lost again, and then to reappear, further out and jetting for safety.

There was the roar of water battering his eardrums.

And then there was only the keening of a gull, and the whispering of the wind through his grey wings.

—BRIAN M. STABLEFORD

*He was the last man on earth ; or so he thought. Until the phone rang . . . A macabre and sensitive tale by one of America's most brilliant young writers.*



# Thomas M. Disch

# THE NUMBER YOU HAVE REACHED

After the boredom had gone on long enough, the panic set in. This time it came midway through Volume 6 of *Toynbee*. Usually a long swim would have taken care of things, but now it was winter. He went out on the veranda in his tee-shirt and let the wind from the lake rasp at his

exposed flesh. He looked at the city buried in snow, and the great unblemished whiteness of the scene made his heart ache with the sense of his own loss and because it was so beautiful, too. He grasped the balcony rail, and the cold metal pricked the warm skin of his palms. His muscles ached to be used. His flesh needed the touch of other flesh. His mind needed to come up against another mind. He had to talk.

He hadn't realized how hard he had been straining on the iron rail until he had torn it loose from the two pins that moored it to the cantilevered slab of the balcony. He let go of the railing and watched it drop the fourteen stories to the street into soft, powdery snow.

The next day was better. He was back under control. Of course he had had to put Toynbee away for the time being. He exercised, carrying up heavy boxes of books and canned food from the lobby. He took a mental count of the steps. From the lobby to the second floor there were eighteen steps, and fifteen between all the other floors. One hundred and ninety eight, all told. It upset him that the total figure stopped just two short of two hundred. As soon as he had reached, panting, the last step, his mind would continue, independently: one hundred and ninety nine, two hundred.

Once all the parcels had been put away, he began to clean up. As usual, he had let the apartment become very messy. He swept out all the rooms, taking the sweepings to the veranda and releasing them into the still fierce wind. Then, in old, old clothes, down on his hands and knees, he scrubbed the wooden floors, bearing down with both hands on the stiff brush, counting the strokes. Then he waxed the floorboards till they gleamed. He dusted and waxed the furniture and tried to do the windows too, but the Wind-ex froze on the cold glass. When he was very tired, he tried to read again—a mystery, no more than that—but the only thing that interested him, the thing to which his eyes forever returned, was the number on the corner of each page. The book was 160 pages, from which he subtracted the number of the page he was on in order to arrive at the amount that there was still left for him to read. At about one o'clock he laid the book down and listened to the lake wind slamming at the windows and, beneath that, the de-

mute ticking of the eight-day clock. That night he dreamed that he was making love to his wife, who was dead.

He heard the phone ring, and for a while he only watched it, but a phone that is ringing looks just the same as a phone that is not ringing. At last he lifted the receiver and held it to his ear. "Hello!" he said, and then: "Hello?"

"Hello," she replied, very matter-of-factly.

"I didn't think the phones were working," he said. It was a silly thing to say on such an occasion, but he had avoided a sanctimonious *Thank heaven!* or the bathos of *Speak to me, say anything, but speak to me!*

"It's the automation, I guess. Lots of things are still working, if you pay your bills."

"I like your voice," he said. "I like the sound of it."

"It's a husky voice," she said.

"It reminds me of my wife."

"Was she beautiful?"

"Lidia was very beautiful. She was the Homecoming Queen at U.C.L.A."

"What were you?"

"I went to another school."

"That doesn't answer my question."

He blushed; she was so blunt. "I was the captain of the football team. What else?" He laughed deprecatingly. "If you'd like, I'll show you my picture in the yearbook."

"Over the telephone?" This, in a very cool tone.

"Won't you come here?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?" Tears welled up into his eyes. His stomach knotted, suddenly, as though the illimitable loss of these last years were concentrated in that single reply.

"I don't know you well enough," she explained.

"How do you know me at all? How did you know to call me here? Do you know what I think? I don't even think you exist! I'm just imagining you."

"But you'll still talk to me, won't you?"

He made no reply.

"If you like," she said, "I'll talk to you. I've been watching you for a long time, actually. The day before yesterday I saw you out on your veranda. You stood

there such a long time in just your tee-shirt that it made me feel cold. Your name is Justin Holt. I saw that on your mailbox, and, of course, then I realized who you were."

"What's your name?"

"You're that astronaut. I read all about you at the library."

"Yeah, that's who I am, all right. I'll bet you haven't even bothered to think up a name for yourself. Or a background either."

"I'm not going to tell you my name. You wouldn't believe it. But I grew up in Winnetka, outside Chicago, just like your darling Lidia, and I went to college at Bennington, though I *wasn't* Homecoming Queen. I majored in Home Ec."

"You can't do that at Bennington. It's not that kind of college."

She giggled. "I'm making fun of you, Justin. Because I know Lidia studied Home Ec. at U.L.C.A. It was in the wedding announcement in the *Tribune*. God, but a person must be dumb to do that. I can't stand dumb people. Can you, Justin?"

His hand tightened around the receiver. "How do you know—" But he broke off, realizing his dilemma: either she was real and could not have known these things about Lidia—or he was imagining her, in which case anything she said about Lidia, or himself, came from his own mind.

"I can read between the lines," she said, as though sensing his doubt. "I've seen a lot of Lidias."

"And a lot of my sort, too?"

"Oh no, Justin. You're unique. You're famous. And you're handsome. Did you know that women think you're very handsome? And you're a genius, of course. You have an I.Q. of 198." Her laughter had a cruel animal resonance.

"Why'd you say that?" he asked, sure that the phantasm had betrayed itself for what it was.

"Why not? One number's as good as another."

"Then dial another number," he said, and hung up. Abruptly, he had ceased believing in her. He had always feared that it would end like this, in madness. His exer-

cises in stoicism, his restraint, all his efforts to conserve himself had come at last to nothing.

He drank, sitting cross-legged on the splendid polar bear rug in the middle of the living room. He drank Chivas Regal from the bottle and ate English water biscuits from a tin.

When he woke the phone was ringing again. There were two mice in the biscuit tin, eating crumbs. They paid no attention to the ringing of the phone, but when he got up, they scuttered away. He picked up the phone. It wasn't morning yet. Perhaps it had only just turned dark.

"Hello," she said. "This is Justine."

He laughed, and a stabbing pain tore through his head.

"I told you you wouldn't believe me, but what did you want me to do—lie? It wouldn't have been hard to invent some more probable name. Like Mary. What do think of Mary? Or Lidia? That sounds about as common as dishwater."

"Why do you have to pick on her?"

"Maybe I'm jealous."

"Well, you don't have to be."

"You didn't really love her, did you? You married her just the way you joined the Army, just the way you got yourself picked to go to Mars. That's all you cared for—to get to Mars. And you married Lidia because her father would help you get there."

"Listen, *Justine*," he said, "this is getting tiresome. I don't need you to call and be my guilty conscience. If you're a real person, prove it. But, right now, I don't know a thing about you."

"That's not all you don't know about. What about the millions—"

"The millions?" he interrupted her.

"—of dead," she said. "All of them dead. Everyone dead. Because of you and the others like you. The football captains and the soldiers and all the other heroes."

"I didn't do it. I wasn't even here when it happened. You can't blame me."

"Well, I am blaming you, baby. Because if you'd been ordered to, you would have done it. You'd do it now—

when there's just the two of us left. Because somewhere deep in your atrophied soul *you want to.*"

"You'd know that territory better than me. You grew up there."

"You think I don't exist? Maybe you think the others didn't exist either? Lidia—and all the millions of others."

"It's funny you should say that."

She was ominously quiet.

He went on, intrigued by the novelty of the idea. "That's how it feels in space. It's more beautiful than anything else there is. You're alone in the ship, and even if you're not alone you can't *see* the others. You can see the dials and the millions of stars on the screen in front of you and you can hear the voices through the earphones, but that's as far as it goes. You begin to think that the others *don't* exist."

"You know what you should do?" she said.

"What?"

"Go jump in the lake."

"That isn't funny."

There was no reply. The dial tone buzzed in his ear. She had hung up on *him* this time. He went to look out the windows at the city, buried under the tons of snow that would not be removed, but the window panes were beaded with the frozen droplets of Wind-ex. He picked them off with his fingernails, one by one, counting them. When he got to one hundred and ninety eight, the rage boiled up into one vicious gesture and he slammed his fist into the pane. The cold air rushed in on him, and he made a sound deep in his throat, beyond the sound of simple pain ; it was the sound of an animal at bay.

The furnace in the building was automatic. The telephone was automatic, as long as he paid his bills, and the bank that paid his bills was automatic as long as it received his paycheques, and his paycheques came automatically through the mails from the Federal Government. The entire city was run by automatons, which, one by one, ran down as the fuel or the instructions or the repairs failed them. Even the bombs had been automatic. And the spaceship that had taken him and his companions to Mars and then taken him back, they had been auto-

matic too. Sometimes *he* felt automatic, though as an astronaut he was uniquely equipped to endure his isolation, and he had up to this point kept from panicing too badly. Even in that first week, driving up from the Cape, he had not betrayed the protective mask of smooth inexpressiveness (which he had first consciously assumed in boot camp, but which, unconsciously, temperamentally, he might almost have been born with). Of course, it had helped that the automatic street cleaners had cleared away the dead bodies, and that on highways the stalled cars had been removed. At the time he had reflected that it was strange, it was really quite remarkable that he had been a soldier, an officer in the United States Army, for twelve years and he had never seen a dead body. Naturally, he did eventually find some that hadn't been disposed of. Lidia, for instance, seemed to have been sleeping when the bombs came. She had been in bed, in any case. The body hadn't decayed, for the bombs had been thorough in eliminating life. The vermin had only begun to reappear recently, and God knew where they had come from. The body had just sort of fallen apart.

She kept trying to telephone him, but when he answered the only thing she would say was that he should kill himself since he had killed everyone else. He pointed out that he hadn't killed her, Justine. "Oh, but *I* don't exist!" It did no good to be reasonable with her, so at last he stopped answering the phone. He would sit in the living room on the sofa with a book in his lap and count the rings. Sometimes she would let it go on interminably and he would leave the house and find a bench that faced the frozen marina. He had decided to brush up on his maths. He had forgotten almost everything he had learned in college. The necessity of ignoring the cold made it easier, in a way, to concentrate. When he was really involved with his studies, nothing else mattered. Or, when the wind off the lake was too strong, he might walk down the snow-bound streets, past the numbered buildings, exercising his memory, for this was, after all, the city he had grown up in. He found that he could not remember many of the particulars of his boyhood days. Memories that he had thought secure had, through neglect, diminished almost

to vanishing. So that, sometimes, trudging through the snow, he would just count his footsteps. It seemed that he might, if he kept counting long enough, come up with just the right number, and it would *count* for something. But, while he waited for that number to turn up, he knew enough about maths to be entertained and even instructed. Consider the number 90. 90 was the sum of two squares: the square of 9 and the square of 3. It was also the product of 9 and 10, whereas the product of 9 and 11 was 99. And twice 99 was 198! The numbers on either side of 198 were both primes: 197 and 199. The possibilities latent in number were infinite—literally, infinite.

But behind this growing passion for numbers there was an unresolved anguish, a moral restlessness, a sense of betrayal—though a betrayal of whom he could not have said. One would not exactly have called it *guilt*. It was something that Justine had aroused in him. Perhaps there was a sort of justice in her demand that he should die. There was at least no reason for him to survive. He had done nothing to deserve to be thus singled out. He had been bundled into an automated rocket with two other men and been shipped, like so much cargo, to another planet where he had stayed only long enough to witness the accidental deaths of his companions, and then he had been shunted back to his starting point. It had been the merest coincidence that in the interval the buttons had been pushed that set into motion the automated engines of destruction that in their own way possessed the secret of life and death: the neutron bombs.

Sunset especially terrified him. He was not afraid of the dark, but at sunset he had to be indoors. He would go into the kitchen, where there were no windows, and close the door behind him. After sunset, he could go anywhere in the apartment.

The counting had become a compulsion for him. From the very first day he had had a sense of what it might become. He counted the books on his shelves. He counted his own pulse. He counted off seconds by his watch. He tried to keep track of the ticking of the eight-day clock in the living room. He lay awake in bed for hours before he could sleep, counting.

One night he heard a voice in his dreams singing the nursery song about the clock:

Hickory-dickory-dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock.  
The clock struck one,  
The mouse did run.  
Hickory-dickory-dock.

The phone rang. Before he was quite awake he answered it. "Please," she said, "listen to me. I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't really mean it. Don't you know that? It's been my fault from the very first. You won't do that—you won't do what I said? God, I was so afraid you wouldn't answer." She rattled on incoherently. He felt as though he were at a great remove from the voice at the other end of the wire, as though he were eavesdropping or as though she had dialled his number by mistake.

"Can I come over there now? I should have done that right at the beginning, but I was afraid. I didn't know you. *Can I come there now?*"

He didn't know what to answer. What could he say to someone who didn't exist? The bedroom, he noticed, was drenched in moonlight. It streamed in through the thin muslin curtains and lay on the bed, as tangible as buttermilk.

"What?" he said, abstractedly.

"But perhaps I should decide it by myself alone. Is that what you think? You're right. I will come. I'll be there in . . . in an hour. Or, at the very most, an hour and a half." She hung up.

He looked at the clock. I have ninety minutes, he thought. Five thousand four hundred seconds. He began to count them.

It was hard to do a number a second once you were past one hundred, so when the knock came at the door, he was only at two thousand six hundred and seventy. He tried to ignore her knocking, as he had ignored the ringing of the phone for so many days.

"Please, Justin. Please let me in."

"No," he explained carefully. "If I let you in now, I can't turn back. I'll have admitted that you're real."

"I *am* real, Justin. You can feel me, you can look at me. Oh please, Justin!"

"That's just what I'm afraid of. I'll never know whether I haven't gone completely mad at last."

"Justin, I love you."

"You do understand, don't you? You can see why it's impossible?"

"I won't leave this door. I'll stay here and when you come out—"

"I won't come out, Justine. If you had only come to me at the beginning—instead of phoning. Now it's too late. How can I believe in you now? It would be despicable to relent now, a weakness. Unforgivable. I couldn't stand that, and you could never respect me."

There was no reply from behind the door.

"Go away," he said.

He knew that she was waiting there, baiting her trap with silence. He went out on the veranda and looked at the snow-laden city. It seemed almost brighter in moonlight than under the full glare of the sun.

I'll jump when I've counted ten, he told himself. He counted to ten, but he didn't jump. If he went back to the door, he knew she'd be there—or, at least, that he would think she was there. He had no choice. And wasn't this what she had asked of him? Wasn't this, almost, justice?

He counted to twenty, to fifty, to one hundred. The numbers had a calming effect. They made sense. Each number was just one more than the number that had preceded it, and the next number was one more than that. He counted as far as one hundred and ninety eight. Suddenly, the knocking at the door was renewed, louder than ever. He let himself go and his body dropped the fourteen stories to the street into soft, powdery snow.

—THOMAS M. DISCH

*We are pleased to welcome Paul Jents back to our pages. In this new story he has taken some well-tried science fiction elements; but the end result is far from ordinary.*

# THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

by Paul Jents

It had been somewhere out there. Peering into the far reaches of the galaxy Krane knew he was fooling himself. Perhaps among those whorls of star-stuff where earth had rolled he might pick out the pale and flickering flame that was the sun. But he had as much chance of finding earth—the cosmic dust that had been earth—as of finding his youth again. Both had gone, almost without warning, but for ever. His father, too.

In the old days he had seen a lot of his father. The earth duties were not too demanding then. Reports had to be sent back to Aligua once or twice a week, but there was plenty of time for fun. Not only with his own kind either, but with humans.

He liked humans. He felt even more at home with them than his father. Of course, being a third generation settler helped. It was very rarely that the guard slipped, that they ever suspected he was not as they were.

Sometimes, perhaps, sporting on the beach, he would leave the boys, hurrying home to the white-walled villa on the hill. He knew that his father had come home.

"He can't be," the others would call after him. "How do you know? You couldn't hear. Betcha he's not back. Betcha—"

And when they saw him there, big and bronzed from his travels, they would gape a little.

"Well I'll be—What are you, Krane, boy, psychic or something? You knew all along that he was back here."

His father would flash a warning into his brain even as he grinned, and Krane would cover up, quickly, expertly. They never knew, any of them, that he was not quite human. He grew fond of them. Too fond, maybe.

Certainly he thought of earth as his home. He had been back to Aligua once, on furlough and for a medical check, but he had been too young for it to have made any impression. He thought of it as a grey place, like a photograph, two-dimensional. When he returned to earth it seemed brighter by comparison, like a jewel and with depth.

When the next ten-year leave came round the emergency was just beginning to build up on earth, and no home trips were run until things settled down. That suited Krane. He was having a whale of a time, just out of school and into the university.

He'd met a girl, too, and he didn't give a damn if he never saw the grey wastes of homeland again. Her name was Ann. Small she had been, with honey eyes and breath that smelt of flowers. He could still feel the warm skin of her, and her eyelashes soft on his cheek.

He fumbled in his pocket. There was the coin she had given him that evening, the last time he ever saw her.

They had been together in the dusk, looking down at the still, shallow pool in the courtyard. Her face was perfectly reflected in the bright water, with the moon behind it, and never had the earth seemed as beautiful—or she. She had kissed him then, and tossed the coin into the pool, breaking the clear image.

“I wish,” she said. “I wish—”

And she had refused to tell him what she wished, laughing up into his face, but he knew—of course he knew. While she laughed again, calling him crazy, he had rolled up his trousers and waded out into the pool, through the warm, silver water, picked up her coin and brought it back to her.

“I'll get you anything you want.” He held the coin high. “You don't need this. What do you fancy—the moon? I'll fetch it for you.”

“You just give me that. It's mine!” She had struggled for the coin, held just out of her reach, knowing that she would be worsted, overcome. Wanting to be, until she

lay back quietly in his arms, with the pool at peace again and the still moon looking down at them.

Afterwards she had given him that coin as a keepsake. He glanced at it, bright and untarnished—strange how his eyes misted when he tried to focus closely.

He was to meet her next day, but he had never seen her again. Because in the middle of the night he had awoken suddenly, with the call clear in his brain, the call that had to be obeyed at once and without question.

Then had come the 'hurried, almost panic-stricken embarkation into the space-craft, the launching and the immediate sedation as velocity built up towards the time-warp.

When they landed on Aligua the coin was still shining as brightly as the newly minted moon that night, back on Earth. But the moon and the pool, his father, Ann too, all were now shuffled and redealt as a pack of cards, sorted into strange new packs of electrical energy, the combination lost and never to return.

There had been an accident, they told him. Regrettable, unforeseeable—a chain reaction maybe. Who could tell? What was certain was that the notice had been short, only a few of the craft had time to leave, and the rest of them had gone with the world. Sometimes looking back, Krane wondered if they had ever really existed at all.

They were kind to him, at Aligua. Professionally considerate.

"It's been a bad experience for you, we realise that." The young officer in the rehabilitation section handed him his papers. "You're bound to feel strange after what you've gone through—depressed, even. So we'll do what we can to make it up to you."

"Make it up?" Krane looked at the fool.

"As much as we can, of course. You can have extended leave for one thing. And we'll put your citizenship through as soon as possible—we'll exempt you from the usual service. Once you're a citizen, once you're tuned in, you'll be fine."

"Tuned in?" It was the first time he had heard the phrase.

"They'll explain all that before you take your citizenship—don't worry about it now. But you're really lucky,

although you may not think so now. I've got fifteen years to wait for my operation to come through."

"I don't understand." Krane was beginning to dislike riddles.

"I know just how you feel. Anyway, we've got someone here to help you out. She'll put things straight for you."

As the door opened Krane glanced up. For a moment he caught his breath. She was so like Ann, the height, the colouring. Then he looked closer and saw the difference. The eyes, for example. Ann's had been honey-coloured too, but clear, not clouded.

"This is Krane. And this—well, you can call her Ann, if you like. You brought a picture of the Earth girl with you, and this is the nearest we could get, at short notice. Not a bad simulation, do you think?"

"Hullo, Krane." She smiled at him questioningly, moving forward.

"Hullo—Ann." The name stuck in his throat.

"Off you go, the pair of you." The young officer turned back to his papers. "We'll send for you when it's time for citizenship, Krane. Until then—enjoy yourself."

Sooner than he thought, Krane began to do just that. There was so much to do and see in this new world. In many ways it was like the Earth, he found, and in some ways better. For one thing, there were servants.

On Earth, although everything else was available in abundance, servants were the prerogative only of the very rich. Here they were everywhere, serving him at table, cleaning the rooms of the apartment provided for him, even valeting him—and all with a gentle, withdrawn courtesy that he found vaguely disturbing.

Several times he tried to get through to them, to talk to them as equals, as he would have done on Earth. They replied to him politely, but then seemed to return as quickly as possible into their own private world. They seemed to be—listening.

"But of course," Ann told him when he asked her about it. "They're tuned in."

Again that phrase which meant nothing to him. "A sort of radio programme, you mean?"

"Sort of—they'll explain it all to you before your citizenship."

"Yes, but I—I feel a bit guilty with all these people waiting on me—I'm not used to it. What right have I—"

"Look, Krane, they're citizens too remember. And they're perfectly happy to do just what they are doing—happier than you are. They're switched on, you see."

"They're—what?" He frowned at her.

"All right—tuned in, then. Look—I keep telling you, you won't understand it yet. Come on—let's go swimming."

And he could get nothing else out of her.

Other things puzzled him too. The cities he saw were much smaller than those on Earth, many of them almost primitive. There were very few other cars on the roads—motoring was a delight, except for the terrible roads. Outside the cities, in the great stretches of farmland, the roads became lanes or even earth tracks. Nowhere did he see anything approaching an arterial motorway.

There were no railways and very few aeroplanes—in fact machines seemed to exist only in the government buildings. Quite often, however, he heard the hiss and roar of decelerating space-craft, invisible through the low-lying clouds.

Once again Ann was not very helpful when he asked.

"Why don't we travel? Because we don't want to go anywhere—it's as simple as that. One place is as good as another—you'll know when you become a citizen. Look, let's go for a drive."

"But I thought you said one place was as good as another," he teased her.

"Oh don't keep arguing. You'll understand it all—"

"When you become a citizen," he chimed in, and they both laughed.

Even with Ann there was something remote, a part of her mind that was barred to him. Every so often, right in the middle of a conversation, she would gaze into mid-distance, ignoring him for minutes at a time. Or else she would be miserable, dissatisfied with all he said, unhappy wherever they went. At first he put it down to feminine cussedness, but later:

"If I'm boring you, you've only got to say so." He took his arm away from her.

"Eh?" She started and came to with an effort. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's a bit unsettling, you know." Krane decided to have it out with her. "We've been sitting together for a couple of hours now, and you haven't said a word to me. Just sitting there, gazing into space—"

"I've said I'm sorry, haven't I? Of course you don't bore me. It's just that—"

"Just that I can't get through to you," he interrupted bitterly. "Just that you're always thinking of something else, even when—"

She stopped his mouth with her lips, holding him close to her. In spite of himself he responded, at first reluctantly and then savagely.

"I do love you," she told him, lip to lip. "I do. But if—" She hesitated.

"If what? Come on." He pressed her. "If—?"

"If you'd ever been tuned in yourself, you'd understand. There! I knew you'd be mad."

For in a rage he had left her, running down the stairs to the car, driving recklessly out of the city. He must have travelled for hours before his anger slowly subsided. At last he turned down a quiet track to a smallholding. He slowed the car.

"Can you fix me something to eat?"

The farmer's head turned slowly as he returned to consciousness from some infinite distance.

"If you'll wait till I've given the cattle their mush."

Laboriously he ladled out the steaming stuff, the hornless animals, smaller than those on Earth, clustering around him. His face was remote, his movements mechanical. Like a zombie, Krane thought. Like an automaton.

An automaton? Something in his mind clicked.

Later he sat in the farmhouse, his stomach full and his anger subsided. The farmer and his wife were watching him quietly, without curiosity or conversation.

"Do you always feed your cattle like that?" Krane enquired.

"Sure." The flat syllable, with the eyes scarcely seeming to focus on him.

"What, humping the stuff in buckets? Day after day, ladling it into the trough, all the way from the house?"

This time the farmer did not even trouble to reply, nodding without interruption to his abstracted thoughts.

"Well, say. I could save you a helluva lot of work. Got a pipe have you—length of drain pipe, something like that? You have? And you've a pump too—I saw it in the yard. You could fill that trough automatically, know that?"

The farmer's head was slowly beginning to shake. There was a curious expression on the woman's face.

"Why, sure you could." Suddenly Krane was enthusiastic. Here was something useful he could do for once. "What's the sense of slogging away there, day after day, when—Why, I could probably fix up a time-switch, so that all you do is to heat up the mush first and—"

He looked up as a shadow fell across the table. The farmer towered over him.

"Get out, mister."

Krane gaped, too amazed to move. The sight of a genuine emotion was strange to him—and the other's face was working with a consuming anger. His fist was raised to strike.

"Get out!"

"But I was only trying—I haven't paid you, I—"

Shaken, he rose to his feet. Both the farmer and his wife were approaching him slowly, but with an indescribable menace.

"Get!"

Krane turned and walked towards his car. As he climbed into the driving-seat he felt their eyes upon him. He turned once before he drove off. They were standing at the entrance to the farmhouse, motionless like pointers, their cold gaze following him.

Was the world mad or was he? Krane's mind battered against a series of unanswerable questions all through the long drive home. Why did the people behave like zombies? Why could he never get through to them? And when he did, why did they become insanely angry for no reason at all? Why wasn't there any traffic on the roads? Why did they do everything the hard way? Why—

He was glad to see a light under the door when he got back to his apartment. Ann. It would be good to relax with her, to hold her in his arms, feeling her ready res-

ponce, just to accept her as she was, without enquiring any more about the distant look in her eyes. Nice to pretend that she was the *real* Ann he had known once, long ago.

He flung open the door. Nice.

"Ann," he called. "Ann?"

They were tall, the two of them, and they came to either side of him silently, gripping his arms.

"Krane?"

He nodded, looking at their peaked caps, trying to raise his arms just a little. The grip tightened, gently but noticeably.

"We'd like you to come with us, Krane, please."

"What—what for?" In spite of himself his voice was a shade unsteady. In any world police were police.

"It won't take long." They were urging him towards the door. "We'll use your car—"

"Ann—where's Ann?" Suddenly he wondered if she had betrayed him. Why? How? For what? "Where—"

"Soon straighten it out." The grip tightened on his left arm.

"Just to headquarters." And the right. Now it was beginning to hurt.

"I'm coming," he muttered sullenly.

"Thanks. This way, then." But the grip did not slacken. In the speeding car he tried once more. "What's it all about?"

"Won't take long." The face next to him was unsmiling.

"Soon straighten it out." The other peaked cap remained in strict profile.

He tried no more.

In the headquarters building, the lift took him up to the same floor as when he had first arrived. There, still at his paper-strewn desk was the same officer who had been in the rehabilitation centre. The police released him and withdrew just out of his vision.

"What have you got to say for yourself, Krane?" They looked at each other with angry eyes. "We do all we can for you, and you have to go and make a nuisance of yourself. It's—"

"What the hell are you talking about? I don't even

know what I'm supposed to have done. Breathed out of turn or something?"

"It's not funny. Do you deny your conversation with a farmer this afternoon?"

The farmer. So that was it.

"Sure I talked to a farmer. He was crazy, I reckon. Why? What's he—"

"Do you deny you talked to him about automation?"

Krane's eyes widened. The question was quite serious. Were they all mad around here?

"Of course I did. I told him I could automate his cattle feed for him. I could, too. So what?"

"You did." The other's tone was final. "You admit it. There's nothing more to be said."

"There darn well is!" Krane glowered at the fool. "I talked to him about automation—is he excommunicado, or something? So what?"

There was a long pause. For a moment Krane feared that the officer had gone zombie on him like all the rest. But instead his face was a picture of bewilderment.

"Do you mean you don't know? That your father didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what? About the birds and the bees, do you mean? I saw precious little of my father for the last few years. Thanks to—"

"Just a minute." Hastily the other rose to his feet. "I—I won't keep you long. I—"

"Soon straighten it out?" Krane echoed sarcastically as the door closed, but the set faces of the watching police did not change. After a couple of minutes the officer reappeared. "Will you come this way, please?"

He led him down another corridor, and to a door before which he knocked and waited.

"Come in," said a voice. Krane entered alone and the door closed behind him.

The room was bigger, the desk quite free of papers, and behind it sat a much older officer, with a calm face and the most desperately tired eyes he had ever seen.

"Well now." The voice was soft and measured. "My name's Trando, and it looks as if we owe you an apology."

"For an inquisition, you mean?" Krane seized the ad-

vantage. "For dragging me here in the middle of the night? For your thugs outside—"

"Just a moment." Trando raised his hand. "Thugs, you say? In my experience they are most reliable and courteous officers. Do you complain of any violence? If so I'll have a full investigation made, I promise you. And it's early evening, you know—scarcely the middle of the night."

"Well—" Krane shuffled mentally. "I didn't exactly—"

"Then don't let us have any wild language—that will get us nowhere. We are both rational beings, let's talk rationally." He paused, letting it sink in. "Do you know why your father was sent to Earth?" he inquired finally. "He and the other colonists with him?"

"As a precaution. To report back here in case there was any danger of our being attacked from Earth."

"Just so." The leonine head nodded. "Attack from whom?"

"Well—from men, I suppose."

"No. They were never strong enough to be a danger. From machines, Krane. They are the enemy."

"Machines?" His eyes clouded—was Trando mad as well?

"I see that you don't know the history of your own planet, or even of Earth." The other sighed and settled in his chair. "Let's start from the beginning. Once, long ago, we were very similar to the human civilisation which you found on Earth—and at that moment we were nearest to destruction. Not from a nuclear warhead, or an exploding population, but of enslavement by the machine. And in particular by the most sophisticated and deadly of the species—the computer.

"Consider the great powers in the world you left, poised to fly at each others' throats. Who determined the balance of power, whether to attack or stay on the defensive?"

"Heads of state?" Krane hesitated. "Their advisers?"

"No. The computer. It was a computer which assessed the military strength of any power, a computer which determined the exact proportions of warheads, missiles, rockets. It was a computer which correlated the infinite complexity of data affecting those calculations—no human brain could grasp the complexity of the converging in-

formation. And the generals, and the heads of state, dutifully performed as the computers instructed."

"But I don't see—" Krane began slowly.

"Of course you don't see, and nor did mankind, although there were warnings enough. They saw computers designing computers, and the children of their begetting more advanced than the parents—and they did not understand. They saw computers duplicating the amino-acid reactions of the brain—of life itself, and did not understand. They saw men trained to serve computers, eagerly competing and training for their serfdom, and were not warned.

"And these were computers of only the third generation, in their infancy, when the world was destroyed. What do you think would have happened with the fourth generation—the fifth? Machines ten times as sophisticated and fifty times as deadly?"

Krane was silent.

"I will tell you, then." Trando's voice was sombre. "What follows is enslavement. How do we know? Because long ago we were enslaved ourselves. By only a few, computers of the fifth generation. But to throw off that thraldom was the bitterest struggle of conscious life against the machine. Echoes of that struggle linger in fable through the galaxy. There were, perhaps, similar stories even upon Earth? Giants? Ogres?"

"Computers?" Krane asked, only half comprehending. There was a long silence.

"And so we watch," the other continued. "In all the worlds where there is intelligent life that could reach us. Most of it is not unlike our own—we aren't really interested in insects or in monsters. They can never develop sufficient mechanical dexterity to spawn computers. But where we find creatures like ourselves—we watch."

"And when they begin to develop? When they become civilised enough to make machines—automatic machines—what then?"

"Automation—that is the first step." Trando nodded. "Then we warn. We turn. And in the last resort, we destroy. We will never be conquered from space by that which we have exterminated here. Never."

"Destroy?"

"Destroy." The voice was firm. "Where we cannot arrest the danger, as we have done on our own planet, deliberately, we will destroy the brains that create it. That is why here we have halted mechanical progress short of automation, and we have caused the word itself, automation, to become anathema—a treasonable doctrine. That's why you were arrested just now."

"And that's why there are so few machines." Krane voiced his thoughts as they ran. "So much manual labour, agriculture, servants."

"Exactly. This is an absolute surety against enslavement by the machine. Incidentally it's not such a bad philosophical doctrine either, the simple life." For the first time Krane saw a smile on the face opposite. Suddenly it was illuminated.

"But surely, if you arrest progress you stagnate. Deteriorate—out of sheer boredom, I should think," he objected.

"No. Knowledge flows into other channels. For instance, we're quite good at psychology." Trando chuckled. "We'd probably pass at brain surgery, too."

"Brain surgery?"

"Of course. You're telepathic, aren't you—to a limited extent? You can receive although you can't transmit. You received orders on Earth that way. Why, do you think? And why have you got a little scar, just here?" A finger tapped his right temple. "Just as I have, and anyone else over five years old?"

"Five years—"

"That's right. When you returned here from Earth, for the first time. You had your operation then—quite a minor one, by the way. And the transistor cell inside your cranium will outlive you." Trando grinned cheerfully. "You'll have your next one in a day or two. Your citizenship operation."

"My what?" Krane was still feeling his forehead.

"Just a little one—nothing to it. You won't even feel sore afterwards—the brain's quite insensitive to pain, you know. We just short out about five cubic inches—a few million cells—and then—we tune you in."

"And when I have this operation, I become a citizen

like all the rest?" he asked slowly. "They're all tuned in, are they?"

"That's right. Next week you can be switched on too. Then you—"

"Like hell I will!" His brain cleared. "Like hell I'll have an operation!"

"But I assure you—"

"You can keep your damned assurances!" He could have hit the calm face. "Me? Become a zombie like the rest of them? Wandering around in a dopey dream? What do you do to them, make them imbeciles? Well, you don't do that to me. You can kill me first."

"My dear chap, why do you get everything wrong, without exception? We wouldn't dream of killing you. And these—er—zombies, as you call them, are very much more alive than you have ever been. Do you know what tuning in means? Do you? Oh—no more emotional outbursts, *please*." The voice was pained. "We'll take the melodrama as read. Now, you will agree that if it is necessary to abolish automation, a great deal of hard, monotonous labour is inevitable?"

"If."

"And this manual work is carried out by our citizens, as you have seen. But tell me, did they appear to you to be unhappy? Or even conscious of the work they were performing?"

"Well, no." Krane thought back to the calm, removed faces. "But—"

"And they weren't conscious. Oh, their bodies worked—your farmer sweated as he carried the mush, but not his mind. We have automated his mind you see—it was as free as the air."

"Free? Automated?" Krane blinked—this one was as crazy as the rest. "I don't know what the devil you're talking about."

"Just this." Trando stood up. "When you become a citizen, certain inessential brain cells are shorted out, as I told you. They vary from case to case—just those that will enable you to perform routine work quite automatically. In their place we plant the mechanism which will allow you to lead the life of the mind."

"Of the mind?" He was crazy.

"Look, you have a preoccupation with Earth—right? You'd like to live there? After the citizenship operation, you will. Oh, your body will be here, performing its allotted tasks—you will even answer when you're spoken to. You'll go through the motions of living here, but your real life, your mental life, will be back on Earth. Your labour here will be like a dream. You—the real you—will be back on Earth, as if it had never been destroyed. You—"

"You mean you want to rob me of consciousness, is that it?" Krane spoke with infinite disgust. "To make me live in a dream?"

"No, no, no. Lord, but you get it mixed. Look, I'll show you."

He led the way out of the door, past the two vizored guards, down a long corridor. He paused before a strong metal grille and showed a pass. Krane noticed that the guard there was alert, sharp-eyed. No zombie this.

The grille slid back and they walked to a closed wooden door beyond. This the guard opened with a key fixed to his belt. They passed through.

The room was high, filled with the dim light of a cathedral from remote, lofty windows, and filled also with an infinitely pervasive humming noise. It took a moment or so for Krane's eyes to accustom themselves. Then he was reminded not so much of a church but of a cotton mill.

The place was full of reels, serried rows of them, rank upon rank, reaching up to the ceiling, humming their quiet song as they spun. But it was not cotton which issued from them. Wires, glistening silver as they caught the light, passed swiftly into the maw of what seemed a huge loom.

"Do you know what this is?" Trando asked. "This is your dream factory—life itself is being spun here. See of what stuff these dreams are made."

He pressed a bell-push by the side of one of the machines. An overalled mechanic appeared, quiet and alert like the guards. Trando spoke to him.

He turned away for a moment then reappeared pushing before him a small video screen on a trolley, from which hung several electric leads. The mechanic plugged in a lead to one of the banks of outlets by each reel, glancing

at the screen which was turned slightly away from Krane. He frowned and selected another outlet, then another. Finally he was satisfied, and beckoned the two onlookers towards the video screen. As they approached him he gave them each a pair of headphones.

Krane saw a beach, broad and sunlit, having a curious three-dimensional effect, although the screen itself was no more than fourteen inches square. The colouring was perfect, with great surfing waves creaming up the glistening sands.

As he slipped on the headphones the wind's song became audible above the rush and roar of the sea, the beat of the advancing waves.

Trando touched his arm, pointing to a pair of handles by each side of the screen. He reached out and grasped them . . .

He ran towards the sea, feeling the first cool shock of it on his legs, ducking his head under before he went back for the surf-board. He licked the salt from his lips. Then he walked steadily out, through the shallow, roaring seas, the board before him. It grew deeper and he ducked through the surf, waiting for a good wave.

Here it came, towering up, a blue and white-streaked mountain, the surf glistening like snow upon its summit. Judging his moment he threw himself on the board, feeling the glad acceleration, the champagne tang of the sea foaming round his body as he skidded the board at the crest of the wave—

Just visible he saw Trando's hand as he withdrew the lead. He was back in the quiet, mill-like room, amid the humming wheels. For a moment he felt dazed.

“Eavesdropping, really.” Trando smiled. “But that's a pale shadow of what's going on in one of your colleague's brain right now. An Earth settler like you, of course, and a full citizen now. I gather he was a pretty good swimmer.

“His job? Well, if you saw him now you'd think he was a labourer. But he would know he was surfing. Today. Perhaps tomorrow he'd be playing football, skiing, anything at all. And remember, what you experienced was an artificial crudity compared to his sensations.

“Well, now. I say he's a labourer, but he *knows* he's back on that Earth of yours—he's living it. Who's right?

He ought to know, don't you think? It's his life, after all—and what a life."

"What a life," Krane muttered. "It's not real at all."

"Where does reality exist, but in the mind of the subject?" Trando began to lead the way back to his office. "Look—supposing you're back on Earth, playing football. All right, that's first-hand living—you're doing it. Now, you're still there, watching a game from the stands. Oh, you're lost in it, you forget the hard seats, that you're old and fifty and too fat—you're living the game. But second-hand living, surely?

"Or you're seventy, and it's too much of a drag to go to the match, so you watch it on television, from your arm-chair. You're absorbed in the pygmy grey figures that represent life for you, at that moment. Third-hand living—the game you're watching isn't even real. Or a film of the match, shown on television—fourth-hand living. Ah, but you live it, Krane, in the mind. But here, remember, you live it absolutely—here you'd be playing the game, kicking the ball, down in the mud."

"And you transmit continuously?"

"We can interrupt it for emergency announcements—cut out all transmissions simultaneously. But we've never had to do it. It's individually programmed, of course, and infinitely variable. There's a simple feed-back device implanted with the transistors, so that the nature of the transmission is determined by the individual himself. To put it simply, we can make your imagination reality. Literally, we can make your dreams come true—a happy state, Krane. Can you think of a happier?"

"And if I say no—if I refuse the operation, what then? You put me down, I suppose? Kill me?"

"Of course we don't—what do you take us for?" There was a trace of irritation in Trando's voice now, although his face was still patient. "The choice is yours, quite freely. Mind you, existence would be pretty loathsome for you if you did decline, so we wouldn't keep you here—just in case of accidents. No, you'd go out with the deviates."

"The what?"

"We aren't successful every time, Krane, I've got to warn you. The failure rate is pretty small, though, about .02 per cent. They're the deviates—not quite normal.

There are little colonies of them outside most of the cities. We've got one twenty miles to the east of here, as a matter of fact. If you don't want the operation you could go and live with them, but you wouldn't like it much, I'm sure of that. And it might be difficult to get back here."

"You say there's no compulsion at all?" Krane gazed at him disbelievingly.

"My dear chap, you're free as air. Look, no guards." Trando walked to the door and opened it. "You can go down the stairs and away any time you want. But you won't, of course." He laid a hand on his shoulder. "You'll be a sensible chap and take the operation. Honestly, I wish I was having it myself. I'm going to leave you now to think it over. There's a buzzer on the wall—ring when you've made up your mind."

He gave a friendly smile and walked out.

For a time Krane sat very still. Only his eyes moved as he scanned the room minutely for hidden viewers. It looked ordinary enough, an office like any other, but microphones could be anywhere. There was bound to be an alarm.

Quickly he slid out of his chair, dropping silently to the floor. Keeping low, he inched his way towards the door, his senses alert for the tell-tale bell. But all was quiet. With infinite care he cracked the door open, looking out into an empty corridor.

No. A worker of some kind was coming down it towards him. He had been watched after all. He—

But the face was dull, unseeing. The footsteps passed the door without stopping, growing fainter along the corridor. When all was silent, Krane peered out once more.

There was a window opposite, the chill air rustling the curtains, and a bed of earth beneath it with a few straggling plants. He was out of it in a shallow dive, falling to his knees in the soft soil, and then staggering to his feet in a shambling run.

Sooner than he thought he reached the car. There was a guard of some kind near it. Krane crouched low as he slid the door open slowly, keeping the car between himself and the guard. He slid into the driving seat, careful not to raise his head above the window as he inserted the key and switched on.

He looked quickly. The guard was sauntering away, his back to the car park.

Krane gunned the engine, crashing through the gears as the tyres screamed on the roadway. He hunched low in his seat, waiting for the shouts, but none came. He glanced in the driving mirror. The road was empty behind him.

After a mile or so, still without pursuit, he began to think clearly. East, twenty miles to the east, that was where they were. What had Trando called them? The deviates. The rebels against the system, those who dared to think for themselves. That was where he belonged.

As he left the city the road became rough, with deep ruts and unfilled potholes. He was forced to slow down, but it didn't matter now. He was sure he was not being followed.

Quite suddenly he turned a blind corner and came upon the frontier post. It was about a hundred yards from him, a light pole barring the road, and a single sentry leaning on it. He was facing the other way. Krane saw him lounge upright as he heard the approaching car and come forward to meet it, his hands well clear of the gun at his belt.

At the last moment Krane accelerated sharply, driving the car full at him. The startled face writhed itself into a soundless shout, then the car was past him. It swept him to one side as it crashed into the pole barring the road.

The light wood shivered but one piece of it smashed into the windscreen, staring it crazily. Krane rammed his elbow through the glass, thrusting it away as the wind sang in his hair. The car careered on, lurching on the pitted road. Then he heard the first of the shots.

He flicked the wheel to one side and then to the other, his fists white on the steering-wheel as the car swayed. The road was dead straight for a distance yet. Another shot. Still, he might get away with it, if—

A giant's hand slapped him on the shoulder, butting him against the wheel, driving the breath from his body. He grunted as he straightened out, waiting for the pain, knowing he had been hit. All he felt was a numbness. That and a trickling warmth.

He kept his foot hard down on the throttle, the car still swaying, and suddenly the bend of the road was upon him. He swept round it and away.

Krane had no idea how long he had driven. Gradually the single bushes became larger, more numerous, crowding together and throwing a shade. At last the road was running through a tangled and stunted woodland. It grew narrower yet, a mud-track, but he kept up the best speed he could. His shoulder was aching now. It was difficult to concentrate through the pain. Every so often a red mist dropped below his eyes. He had to shake his head to clear it away. He had to—

He felt the car tilt at a stupid angle as he tried desperately to correct it. He slid away from the steering wheel and the pain stabbed in earnest at his shoulder as he forced his way back. For hours he seemed to hang there, slithering, slipping, fighting the reluctant wheels back on the road. Then the angle increased. He fell away. Dimly he heard the noise of a great roaring and then—blackness.

There was pain and an enormous thirst as he opened his eyes. Krane turned his head and looked at the wrecked car—thank the lord he had been thrown clear, and that it hadn't caught fire. It was lying on its side, one of the twisted doors jammed half open. As he watched it started to move, metal screeching against metal. A face looked out.

At first Krane thought it was a female, with its long hair and deep-set eyes. Then as it climbed out of the door, dragging one of the seat cushions with it, something about the set of the mouth told him it was male. The scarlet scar above the forehead stood out like a wound.

"Water," Krane called. "Water."

Instantly the figure dropped the cushion and leaped away into the bushes with the hunted speed of an animal. Krane peered. Not a leaf moved and yet Krane knew it was still there.

"I won't hurt you," he called again. "Water—please—water."

Slowly the fronds parted and the face peered out again, the deep-set eyes regarding him. Krane smiled. The creature emerged cautiously, poised to leap away.

First it made for the cushion, dragging it into the bushes out of sight. Then it returned and came towards Krane slowly, its muscles tensed like springs. The eyes were fixed unblinking upon him. Looking into them he saw that they were without depth, animal. And knew he had made a mistake.

"Water?" The voice was a growl, without expression.

One of the furred hands advanced towards Krane's shoe. He saw the long nails clenching and retracting.

"Get away!" he shouted, suddenly. "Get away, you—"

As he raised himself on one elbow he felt the dried blood around his shoulder break, and grunted from the pain of it.

At his movement the thing leaped away, but not as far as the bushes. It crouched, just out of reach, waiting for a moment. Then it came forward slowly towards him. In its mouth Krane saw sharp, yellow teeth.

He shouted again. The creature paused only momentarily and then came on, creeping, a snarl deep in its throat.

"Back! Back! Get back I say!" There was panic in his voice.

The sharp claws touched his leg.

"Back!" The voice was at his side, and yet he had not spoken. There came the crack of a whip and the creature yelped as a scarlet welt appeared on the skin of its neck. It sprang for cover.

At the same moment a uniformed figure stepped out of the bushes, kneeling beside Krane, the whip beside him.

"Here—drink this." Never had water tasted so good. "Now let's have a look at you, son. Turn over."

He felt the cloth of his coat part under a sharp blade, and then a stab of pain.

"Sorry about that, but we've got to see if—No. You're lucky. The bullet went straight through and out again—nice and clean. Now then."

The water was cold on his skin and oddly soothing. Gradually he relaxed.

"Heard your car—don't get many of them round here, you know. I suppose you've come from *them*. Now—I'll put a dressing on, and that will hold you. When did you

have your op, by the way?" He helped Krane to his feet. "Your citizenship operation—when did you fail it?"

He was gazing at him curiously.

"I haven't had it yet."

"No? No—I can see. Not like mine." He looked at Krane's smooth forehead—his own was like a crater. "You haven't had it, you say?"

"No. That's why I was escaping from them. I don't—"

But the other was not listening. Krane looked at him, appraisingly.

Long ago the uniform had been good but now it was threadbare, the tunic frayed and a different colour from the breeches. The buttons were tarnished and the leggings scratched. Its wearer was running slightly to fat with a red, weather-beaten face—quite ordinary except for a pair of intensely bright and recessed eyes. Those and the ruined forehead.

"You're valuable property, son." he muttered slowly. "Do you think you can walk—a couple of miles? Right—and I'll put you in the picture here. My name's Mergin, by the way. I'm chief of this section—and of the others too, by rights. This way."

He led the way down a narrow path through the scrub-land. Krane heard rustlings in the undergrowth and turned to face them, in case the creature who had attacked him should try again.

Mergin took his arm. "Don't worry—they won't try it. Not while I'm with you. I've told you, I'm chief; and they know what that means." He motioned towards the whip. "We get some bad deviates round here."

As he talked Krane began to understand what life meant away from the cities, the scattered tribes of deviates, some nearly normal, most of them like animals. Each territory with a leader, raiding and being raided, carefully partitioned.

"You can help me, son," Mergin concluded. He moved closer. "You and me together, we could beat them. Sure we could."

"All it needs is to get through to them," Krane agreed thoughtfully. "If we could switch them off just for a moment or so, make them see reality, then—"

He broke off. Mergin was gaping at him.

“Are you mad, son? I thought you said you hadn’t had your operation?”

“I haven’t.”

“Then what are you raving about? We can’t fight *them*. Why the hell should we want to fight them, anyway? It’s the others you can help me with—the tribes. They’re all split up—I told you. Now, what I thought was, if we could take them over, one by one. If we—”

“But they’re all deviates, aren’t they?”

“Sure they are—that’s just it.” Mergin took him by the arm. “All except you and me. We—we can think properly. You imagine, son, if we took them over one by one, had them working for us—what a life, eh?”

“No. I’m not interested. I—”

“There’s females, you know.” His breath was hot. “Slaves you could have, if you help me—your pick. Anything *they* can do, we could do better. You and me—kings of the tribes—how’s that?”

He glanced at Krane and paused.

“If once we got them together, you know, the tribes, then we’d have a chance. Against *them*. That’s what you want, isn’t it? Freedom and that. You help me, and I’ll help you.”

Krane looked at his face. The eyes were blazing now.

“Listen—I’ll tell you something. You and me—we’re different. The others—all of them—do you know what?” He whispered. “They’re all mad, son. Not like us.”

His lower lip began to tremble as Krane remained silent.

“If you don’t help me—if you don’t—Have you come from one of the others—a spy are you? If you are, I’ll kill you. I—”

“I will,” Krane said quickly. “I’ll help you.”

“Thanks. Thanks, son. I knew I could—” He looked away into the undergrowth. “Do you know, I believe that thing’s following us.” He raised his whip.

Looking towards the pointed, white face, yellow teeth. Mergin was quite unprepared as Krane wrenched the whip away from him and brought the heavy stock crashing down just above the scarred forehead.

Had he meant to stun him just enough to get away? Or had he known in his heart what would happen? The

creature's leap, claws striking home to the defenceless back, a black hump writhing against the shabby uniform. And the yellow teeth turning red.

Snatching up the whip, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, Krane began to run . . .

"Well, what *do* you want?" Trando's tired eyes looked at him across the desk. "You've tried to opt out of life. It's about time you made up your mind, Krane. After all, you've been pretty lucky. By rights you should have been dead three times over. From Mergin, or from any of the deviates on the way back. Or the sentry could have shot you when you did get to the frontier. But now I fancy your luck's played out. Which is it to be—us or the deviates?"

"I just don't know." Krane's voice was slow. "I don't—"

"You've had time enough to think about it these last weeks, surely? Don't think you're doing us a favour—"

"No?" Krane replied bitterly. "Not by submitting to you? Opting out of life, as you put it?"

"You talk as if we, the administrators, were people in power, to be envied. Don't you see, we all of us long to be switched on ourselves? Yes, the few who still fly the space-craft, the settlers, your father—we're only serving out our time. Me? Of course I want to be tuned in. Then fools like you will never trouble me—there will be no deviates, no failures. Perfection. Heaven on Earth—I can hardly wait for it."

"Without freedom? You call it heaven to live out a programme planned by someone else?"

"Don't you see even yet?" Trando sighed. "It's your own programme, your own choice. All the dreamspinner does is to reflect back to each brain the impulses it receives from it. The same impulses, greatly magnified, a dream translated into reality. And you hesitate! You'd sooner be walled up in your own miserable little mind than break free?"

"Yes." Suddenly Krane saw clearly. "But that's just what you're afraid of, isn't it? Freedom—freedom of the mind. That's what you really fear; not computers, not machines, but thought itself. That's why you channel it

away from reality, that's why you never give the people a free choice. That's why—"

He broke off at a look on the other's face.

"You want freedom? You want reality? You shall have it." Furiously Trando led the way back along the corridor to the dream factory. The guard admitted them to the room of the singing, shining reels, closing the heavy door.

"You want to liberate humanity—yes? Do it." Swiftly he selected a lead and plugged it in, offering Krane the headphones. A video screen was by his side. "How will you know they are liberated, but in your own mind? Switch on, then and achieve their liberation. Tune in and free them."

Krane took the headphones and raised them. Then with all his strength he brought them down on Trando's head. He fell without a cry.

Krane rushed to the heavy door, sliding the bolts into place. Nearby was a red throw-over switch, a microphone. As he approached an alarm shrilled.

A mechanic came running. Taking careful aim Krane sent a video trolley skidding down the narrow passage towards him. Some of the reels spat and rolled as the trolley crashed against them, and the mechanic shrank back. But there was nowhere for him to escape—he groaned as the wheels hit him, and collapsed.

With all his strength Krane flung over the main switch. A strange silence fell as the reels ceased to spin. He gripped the microphone.

"Listen to me," he said. "This is the voice of reality. I have stopped the dream-factory—now you are awake. This is life—this is real. You are free now, all of you, freed from your dreams, free to think."

He paused. Sweat was pouring down his forehead. He had no means of telling whether he was being heard. He couldn't even tell if he was dreaming.

"Come to the factory," he shouted into the microphone. "Come now! Awake. Come and walk in freedom—come."

Three times he repeated the message. Then he sat silent, listening. Outside all was still, not even the guard was knocking on the doors.

He had been fooled then, even now. It was a dream.

Then, far away, he heard a measured beat, as of a distant drum. He climbed to one of the windows. A grey mass was consuming the empty street, its edge breaking like the tide. As it came nearer he saw it was a column of people marching steadily towards the factory.

Nearer. Now he could see their faces, no longer remote but alert with purpose. They approached the factory, surrounded it, and as he heard their feet on the stairs he knew that he had won.

Or had he? The betraying thought seized him. Was this just wish-fulfilment? Had he succumbed himself to the dream-factory, triggered off a train of thought to be magnified there and transmitted back to his enslaved mind?

'Switch on and achieve their liberation'—was this what Trando had meant? Had he failed after all?

Their hands beat like rain upon the door. Slowly he moved to open it to the people.

They marched towards him. With a strange happiness he read in their cold awakened eyes the message of his own death.

He smiled. This, at last, was real.

— PAUL JENTS

*Here is one of the most unusual and sensitive stories to come our way for some time. Paul Cassavetes is a concert pianist; and an old, tired man. He has given to society all that a man may give; but does society agree with him? His dilemma makes enthralling reading; and creates a new and subtly brilliant dimension of terror.*

# IT'S SMART TO HAVE AN ENGLISH ADDRESS

by D. G. Compton

Paul Cassavetes sat quietly in the exact middle of the back seat of the taxi. The car journey represented a break from the incessant pressures of life and he was glad to be able to sit quietly and relax. Although the taxi was taking him to a destination he would never freely have chosen for himself, he was glad simply to be conveyed across the face of England and not have to do a damn thing about it. He was eighty-four years old, tired of doing things about things. When he thought it worthwhile, he would complain to his manager that he never went anywhere he really wanted to go, never saw anything he really wanted to see, never did anything he really wanted to do. He would say that he was the servant of everybody, even down to the man who turned over his music. And now this trekking off to see old Joseph when he didn't in the least want to—this even made him old Joseph's servant.

In a way all this was true. Yet in his whole life the only thing he'd ever really wanted to do was play the piano, and now he'd had seventy years of it.

He sat neatly in the middle of the seat, his marbled hands cupped, one over each knee. In spite of his stiffness, the stiffness of an old man who needs to be watchful of himself, he sat easy. He had asked the driver to go steady, and now the young man pegged cheerfully along in the slow lane, blown about now and then by slipstream from the smart stuff going by. He had seen the thoughts behind the driver's eyes contradict him as he explained the way high speeds made him dizzy. Speed on its own never made nobody dizzy—it was insecurity brought on travel sickness. And what bloody right had the great Cassavetes to feel insecure? But only fools argued with old men. And only damn fools argued with customers. So he kept below a hundred and thirty while the ancient grey skinned monkey-baby sat ridiculously upright in the middle of the back seat, his briefcase held between his little stomach and his thighs.

Beyond Salisbury the driver turned off the motorway, sorting through his automatic drives for something more suitable. Among pink dormitory blocks they came on a village, old houses now high-status living units for men in advertising or plastics. Paul watched the neat walls and windows and little front gardens go by. Villages as he remembered them had always been a little shabby.

Beyond the village the road climbed steeply. Paul leaned forward and tapped on the glass partition.

"Don't rap on the glass, sir." The driver was polite and easy. "There's a call button both sides of the seat. Keep that pressed and I hear you."

The old man showed disintegrated behaviour. There were several buttons in each arm rest, each one clearly labelled. He pressed the wrong one and wound down the nearside window. The driver watched in the mirror, leaving him.

Paul checked himself. Smoothed out his panic. He found the right button, pressed it, and spoke. He'd used taxi intercoms a thousand times before. He'd never have fluffed it if he hadn't let the long journey slacken him.

"Left at the top here," he said. "Just past the stop-off complex. It's a narrow turning."

The autumn sunlight shone on the dimpled copper facings of the shops. They were as warm and bright as

on the day they had been fitted. The motel lay back from the road, its two entrances on either side of a long single-storey tavern. Its show of flags, and the flags along the service station forecourt, were snapping in the wind. The hilltop leaned over the plain below, grid-patterned as far as Stonehenge . . . The other building in the complex might have been for bowling, dancing, sculpture classes, indoor cricket, music appreciation. Paul failed to register the barn-high lettering. He didn't want to.

"Left?" said the taxi driver, staring. "You really mean it?"

"I said it's a narrow turning."

"I never did care for smooth shiny fenders."

The road was gravelled. Just a neat gap in the hedge, expensively, self-consciously unobtrusive. The car fitted exactly, without a whisper. The driver breathed out noisily and accelerated away, flinging gravel.

"It's not far now," said Paul, finger on the button.

"Just past these trees and you'll see the house."

He took his finger off the button.

"And if you start telling me what your first sight of the house does for you," he said to the man's scrubbed neck, "I think I shall scream."

"You've been here before, then?" said the driver.

"Many times." On the button again. "It belongs to a very old friend of mine."

The car cleared the last of the trees.

"That's some house," said the driver. "Do you know what a sight like that does to me? You won't laugh if I say it makes me proud I'm British?"

"I won't laugh."

"The Americans may have most things, but they haven't got anything to match that."

"Not yet."

"Pardon?"

"My friend is a famous composer. When he dies his house goes out to a Valley of Culture. It's already been paid for."

"One day there won't be any of the real Britain left, Mr. Cassavetes."

Paul made no reply. It wasn't even as if he himself had been born in the country. And anyway it was no longer

the real Britain, assuming that it ever had been. Joseph's house was no longer even simply a red brick Tudor mansion set among oaks and elms: much photographed, it was now a part of Britain's heritage, it was the label on exclusiveness, on chic design, on feeling like a millionaire. The car swooped over the rise and down the final curve of brown gravel.

"Your friend's made it good, living in a place like this."

"Joseph Brown. He's music professor at a big American University. Also he has an international reputation."

"If his job's in America, what's he living here for?"

A quarter truth. ". . . He likes it."

The car stopped by the steps leading up to the terrace in front of the house. Paul found one of the door buttons and pressed it. Now that the car was stationary the relay was in circuit and the door opened with a faint hiss. Paul climbed out. He felt no guilt for not having told the taxi driver the exact truth about Joseph's reasons for living in Hale Barton. His relationship with the man had been electronic, entirely a matter of buttons and servo mechanisms. He took the journey card and signed it. Instead of his usual *Satisfactory* he wrote *Excellent driver. Reliable and understanding.* The man deserved more special loadings—he'd shown great restraint, driving at the speed he'd been asked to and taking no sort of advantage of an extremely vulnerable passenger. Paul handed him the card, watched for his reaction as he read it. Any thanks would be vastly oblique.

"I'll look out for your concerts, Mr. Cassavetes. Might even come to one."

Afraid that this must sound like a dig for a free ticket he quickly slid up the window and drove away. Paul stood on the first of the steps up to the terrace, breathing gently and watching the car swan away between the trees. The oaks still had their leaves, but the branches of the elms were bare and pale. In his head Paul imagined the smell of eighty years of bonfires. He turned and climbed the shallow steps with some difficulty.

The door was opened by Joseph's Mexican butler.

"Mr. Brown is in the music room, sir. Perhaps you

would like to wash your hands before I take you through, sir."

"You don't have to take me through. I'm not a stranger here."

"There have been alterations, sir. Confusing. The cloak-room's on your left, sir."

Obstinacy would have been an unseemly indulgence. Nowadays—unless it was to do with his music—Paul never argued with anybody. He went and washed his hands, drying carefully between his fingers where the skin chapped easily. To satisfy the butler he stood for a long time in vain over the lavatory pan. Then he returned to the entrance hall. The butler's eyes flicked up and down him, checking that he, an old man, was properly zipped.

They walked at the slow crawl that the butler thought suitable. Joseph's music room, which had always been the first room on the South Front, was now apparently upstairs, along at the end of the portrait gallery. Paul shuffled as he was expected to shuffle. The gallery floor was polished and smelled of old-fashioned furniture wax. The door at the far end was open: one step up and then darkness. When they reached it the butler pressed a small bell-push in the wall. Lights came on, showing a second door up the one step. The wall in which the second door was set stood some three feet back, the corridor between it and the gallery brightly lit in both directions. There was also a lighted slot between it and the gallery floor. The wall in fact appeared suspended, and when Paul went nearer he could see that there was also a gap at the top between the wall and the original ceiling of the room. The butler was right. There had been alterations.

The inner door opened. Joseph stood in the opening, for a moment not registering who it was. Paul heard the butler lick his lips.

"Mr. Cassavetes, sir. You were expecting him."

Joseph came down to greet Paul. His arms were held out, he was loud and wide and confident. A big man, his turned-on vigour made his presence oppressive. In the last few years—since his operation—his manner had become increasingly youthful and high-powered. It was an imitation, and never quite came off. Paul had the feeling that he brought out the worst in Joseph—at an age when

these things again mattered he was Joseph's junior by fifty-four days. Therefore Joseph had to show him. It would all tend to settle down as the afternoon wore on.

"My dear Paul. How fit you're looking . . . I'm delighted that you could come. I've got my new room to show you. I've finished a new sonata—oh, and there's a man dropping in later whom I particularly want you to meet."

His big arm went round Paul's shoulders, warm and protecting.

"Have a good journey down? Came by road, I expect. These rail-cars just aren't for us old 'uns."

To say this was to do Paul a favour. Paul didn't mind. They had known each other for more than sixty years. Known each other and places and times and feelings that were now all dead. In the early years of their friendship Paul had liked the man a great deal more than his music. More recently that judgement was becoming reversed. But he and Joseph still took trouble with each other, for their ancient friendship was an institution private as well as public.

"Good to see you again, Joseph. Hilda sends her love. And the cats wish to be remembered."

"Hilda—how is she? And what do you do with yourselves? So few concerts now—what do you do with yourselves?"

"Hilda has her plants. And the cats, of course. We read a lot. I play the piano. People call."

"You must tell me what you really do . . . But first I want to show you my new room."

For Joseph still nothing had any reality beyond what he could himself hear and taste and feel and see. He dismissed the butler and led Paul forward through the gallery door.

"You can see right round it," he said. "Over it, under it, right round it. It's completely bug-proof."

Paul stooped slowly. The inner room was supported on six slim transparent pillars ten inches long. Paul had experience of bugging—spending so much of his time in hotels and airline offices and international concert halls he had grown accustomed to listening devices and when

he was in those places he watched his tongue as a matter of course.

"Bug-proof, Joseph? Who'd want to bug you here?"

"The room's completely self-contained. Heating, air conditioning, nothing comes into it from the outside world. The consultant I employed said it was the *only* hundred per cent security technique. The butler checks the spaces round the room every day. Come on in."

"It seemed to me that the butler had shifty eyes. Are you sure you can trust him?"

Joseph took the remark seriously.

"I check myself most times, of course. And he's as reliable as anyone is these days."

They stood together on the one step. On either side of them a narrow, brightly-lit slot. Behind them mullioned patterns of sunshine on the floor of the portrait gallery. Up one more step in front of them the open door into the music room, grey-green wall, end of a dull orange sofa.

"Come on in," said Joseph.

He closed the door carefully behind Paul, kicked a chair to show that Paul should sit in it, and himself went to the piano.

"You have something you want me to hear?" said Paul.

"Is that why you asked me to come?"

"I told you. A new piano sonata. You might like to use it at your next recital."

As a reason for asking an old man to travel all the way from Norfolk it was inadequate. Paul clasped his hands together and listened. He wasn't being shown the new room either . . . Joseph played his new sonata, spaced chords tensed as still water and passages that flamed over and under and through each other. When he had finished playing he sat on at the keyboard, bent over it, motionless.

"Quite straight, you see?" he prompted. "I've given up electronics. You ought to like it."

"Of course I like it, Joseph. Or I think I like it. What I could hear of it. You are still such a shocking pianist that it's very hard to judge."

"Me a shocking pianist? And what sort of a composer are you, for God's sake?"

With this long-standing joke started up between them it would have been easy for Paul to slide out of giving the music a serious judgement. Paul knew that if he took the opportunity Joseph would brood for weeks.

"I like the sonata a lot, Joseph." He went on to say why. Then he hesitated. "I felt a difficulty . . . The first movement, for example—is it truly keyboard material? Myself, I thought I heard—"

"You thought you heard what?"

"I don't know. One of the strings, perhaps? Perhaps the big fiddle?"

Joseph stood up. He roared his delight.

"So you've heard the gossip. And it's all true. Every word of it."

Paul had heard no gossip so he waited, smiling. Joseph sat down again, leant his elbows on the keys. He waited until the jangled notes had died to a faint buzzing.

"It happened in Sweden," he said, "at a Festival of my music in Stockholm. She was playing my second cello concerto. She played brilliantly. I brought her back with me. I'm launching her in London next month. And then New York."

He got up from the piano. He strode round the room, shutting the hi-fi cabinet, fiddling with the bank of tape desks, moving a small stone sculpture half an inch along a shelf.

"She's Irmgaard Berensen," he said. "She's twenty-three."

"Irmgaard . . . The way you say her name, Joseph, it is like a dawn morning. It is like clear water in a mountain lake."

"Don't be such a hypocrite. You know you don't approve."

"What is 'approve'? If you can again write music like that, what is 'approve'?"

Joseph threw himself down on the sofa. He moved into the shadows, only his white hair showing against the velvety wallpaper. Paul turned his chair in the rigid windowless room on its six glassy pillars, and watched the old man Joseph Brown remember. Made him remember.

"She can be a little bitch too, of course . . ."

After a long time.

"I know she is an artist. I know nothing will ever be easy for her. I've been through it all myself, haven't I? But why choose a thing like a cocktail party? A week ago, Philharmonic Society, in front of everybody . . . Look, I wrote those bagatelles when I was very young, a lot younger than her. Of course, she's entitled not to like them. I don't like them very much myself. But . . ."

Paul noticed the clock under the big white table lamp on Joseph's desk. A gilt carriage clock, bright as a drop of water. Its tick had been muted for Joseph's recording apparatus.

"She rang up last night, Paul. Apologised. I'd been at the bottom of the valley. She rang me up. She's still in London. Can't get away till tomorrow . . . I'd been at the bottom of the valley all right."

"I hope it goes well for you, Joseph. You must let me have the sonata to work on."

"So vulnerable. That's what the trouble is. Talk about something else, shall we?"

Paul looked at the backs of his hands. Spread his fingers, kept them moving. Where would all his careful adjustments be, all his acceptances, the day he couldn't play any more?

"A time back I asked you who would want to bug you, Joseph. You didn't answer."

"The composing world has changed, Paul." Joseph relaxed, put his hands behind his head. "The new interest in our sort of music has changed the values. A composer is now like a fashion house—all must be new in one grand unveiling."

"I have played new works, Joseph. I know about locked doors and security checks. But not a man in your position. And not in your own home."

"My agent sees the bookings. He tells me these things do matter." Joseph sounded pleased. "It's what I may do next month or next year that really interests them."

"And it matters so much that your agent makes you be hidden away like a mouse in a box?"

Joseph hid.

"Your reactions are so predictable, Paul. If something

is an innovation, to you it is immediately bad. You choose words that make it sound bad. I am not a mouse, and this is not a box. I had the interior done by that young Spaniard. It's extremely beautiful."

Paul thought of the old music room, the one that was not bug-proof. It had windows. And the sky outside was often low and grey and wonderfully ugly. He sighed.

"Who is this man you said you wanted me to meet?" he said.

"He's a brilliant young doctor. He's the one who fitted me with my radionic stimulator."

Strapped to Joseph's wrist was a small transmitter putting out a signal on each beat of his pulse. This was picked up and amplified by a receiver fixed to the outer membrane of Joseph's heart. The signal was made to stimulate the heart muscle. When physiological changes made the pulse beat more quickly, the heart was stimulated more quickly. The receiver had a sewn-in battery life of twenty-five years. With its assistance Joseph's heart-beat was as vigorous as it had been when he was forty. As long as his arteries held he was a new man. Without the endless tweaking of his stimulator he would naturally long ago have been dead.

"Dr. McKay is in touch with the very latest trends, Paul. He's a very young man. He believes passionately in the future of electronics in medicine."

"We seem to be moving back into an age of enthusiasms. I'm always hearing of young people who believe passionately in the future of something or other."

"You and I were always enthusiasts. What's wrong with that?"

There was nothing wrong with it. Paul wished he had asked his wife to come with him. Hilda would have been able to explain what was wrong with it. He moved his fingers again, suddenly terrified.

"As long as he doesn't try to talk me into any of his gadgetry, Joseph. I want to live until I die. I do not want to be electric."

"That's a dig at me, I suppose . . . Yet I don't *feel* electric." Joseph stared at the ceiling, trying honestly to analyse what he really did feel. "I *feel* alive. I *feel* just as I've always done."

He paused. Paul noticed how silenced the room was.

"And it's given me time, Paul. Time to find out what life's about."

To break it up he suddenly bounded from the sofa. He smiled down at Paul. He took Paul's hands and lifted him gently out of the chair. Paul looked up at him, almost frightened by his disconnected capacities for love. He stood holding Paul's hands, humming short musical phrases, chuckling, wanting to know Paul, wanting to be Paul.

Then he took Paul and showed him the wonders of his room. From one thing to another, pausing by the big XPT player.

"Did you know they're using these in the hospitals now? McKay's work again, of course."

Off again, demonstrating the bleeps of his new harmonic synthesiser. And the painting by Altmeyer that worked on minute pressure changes and was never still. And the experimental synfoniagraph that should have written what it heard but had never worked properly from the day it was first delivered. And Paul only attending with half his mind since he now knew that the reason for his invitation was nothing to do with the new sonata after all. That he was there to meet Dr. McKay, and to meet the doctor in connection with XPT. Experiential recording . . . Joseph had dropped it in all too casually. There was something planned. He knew the signs. Something was going to be asked of him.

At that moment a light flashed above the door, a clear blue light like a pain.

"I'm being called up," said Joseph. "I expect it's McKay."

He went to the door.

"I couldn't have a bell, you see. It might ring when I was recording."

Paul watched his hand on the doorknob. Joseph was between him and door. And even when the door was opened there would still be the butler and Dr. McKay. The trap had many layers, and he'd come into it knowing all the time that he was too old to cope. Superficially his fear was without reason, yet fundamentally it was the most reasonable thing in the world. He fought it silently,

fought with the urge to scream, to hide, to curl up and never be asked for anything again. Which in life just never happened.

Dr. McKay was tall and young and sincere, with large scrubbed hands. He was introduced. Paul nodded, kept his hands behind his back, smiled, hardly dared to move.

"Bring tea up here will you?" said Joseph.

The butler went away, leaving the door for the moment open. Sounds leaked in, and daylight, and the smell of the polish used on the gallery floor. Paul realised that Dr. McKay was speaking to him.

"... especially your playing of Beethoven. Joe tells me you studied under Schnabel."

"For three years in America."

"I have several of his vintage recordings. He was the greatest."

"People who remember him only for his Beethoven do him an injustice." Mechanical. The coming anecdote had been told a thousand times—to hear it again gave him no pleasure. "He played Bach also, though seldom in a concert hall. He said people neglected Bach's intimacy—they tended to think of him either as an inkpot or a cathedral."

Dr. McKay smiled politely. Joseph laughed immoderately. Joseph had heard the story at least forty times out of the thousand. For some reason Joseph was now on edge. Dr. McKay turned to him, finding something to say that might make him more easy.

"Been in for servicing recently?" he said.

"Went only last week."

"The contact on his wrist needs to be changed periodically," said Dr. McKay to Paul. "Otherwise we might set up quite a serious infection."

It was a triumph that Joseph was even alive. Dr. McKay was sensitive enough to be aware of Paul's thoughts, and even of the unthought thought behind them.

"Joe has had it very easy," he said. "We all realise that many of the mechanisms with which we attack human dignity are still crude. Believe me, it does worry us."

"Disease is also crude, Doctor. You do not have to remind me."

"Still, it does worry us."

Tea was brought. Cups were filled, sugar was stirred in, spoons were put on saucers, toasted buns were taken. Conversation was made. And the six glass pillars trembled under the inconsequential weight of history.

"You must forgive me," said Dr. McKay, "if I view you with a slightly professional eye. My special study is the problem of senescence."

"I find it no problem. I am old, and soon I shall die. No problem."

"You're a wise man, Mr. Cassavetes. Also a lucky one. But there are plenty of other men and women who—"

"Wise man?" Joseph ran his fingers through his hair, leaving it on end, boyish. "Wise man? Anti-life, I'd call him. Back to nature gone mad. Who on earth would die if they didn't have to?"

Paul could see that the doctor was in a spot. Joseph could ill afford to be hit at, yet it was presumably important that the doctor should make a good impression on Paul. The doctor hesitated. His eyes moved from one old man to the other. Finally he spoke, but to neither of them.

"Life has a circularity. Some people see this quickly. Others need a little longer. That's all it is."

His eyes asked Paul to understand how things were. Paul, who only felt fear for him and no sympathy, determined to attack. Better to get whatever it was over with.

"Joseph tells me you're working with XPT recordings, Doctor."

"Making them? Did he tell you that?"

"Not making them. Using them in your work on . . . on senescence."

Dr. McKay seemed for some reason relieved. He put down his empty cup, glad of an enthusiasm, glad of something really to talk about. To him talk about meant tell about. He leaned forward, clasping his large red hands together.

"A most marvellous thing," he said. "We've at last got a tape of a tranquil death. A death in God . . . And it really works. It'd make you cry to see it, see the way it works."

The door out of the room had been shut.

"A month ago Pastor Mannheim was admitted," said the doctor. "He knew he was dying and I've never seen a man so peaceful. With his permission we installed the machine—took a perfect recording of the brain-waves. Right up to the point where they ceased." He studied his knuckles. "The playback has the finest effect you could imagine. With this experiential tape nobody need ever again be frightened of death, or angry, or in despair. It would make you cry to see it, the way it works."

"What if these fears and angers and despairs are justified?" said Paul quietly. "Necessary even?"

"My job is to alleviate suffering. I'm a doctor, not a philosopher."

Joseph was tapping his blunt fingernails against the small black box strapped to his wrist.

"All this talk of death," he said. "It's Paul's fault. I think it's got a morbid fascination for him."

"I'd like to know," said Dr. McKay lightly, "what you think of XPT recordings in general, Mr. Cassavetes."

"I've never been plugged in to one."

They were closing in on him.

"But in principle, Mr. Cassavetes. People often say to science's detriment that it merely increases the quantity of life—surely what XPT is doing is increasing its quality? By imposing a full frequency recording of one man's brain fluctuations onto another it is possible for a person to experience emotion and sensation far beyond his normal range. This is a gain in quality, surely?"

"I can see it has great commercial possibilities."

Paul worked his hands, finger by finger, into the arm of his chair.

"Look Mr. Cassavetes—a dumb person can be shown the mental 'feel' of speech. That way he learns in half the time. A man who is searching for God can be helped by sharing in the experiences of great living mystics."

"What a pity they hadn't one of your machines at Gol-gatha, Dr. McKay."

"That's a hysterical reaction, Mr. Cassavetes. I wouldn't have expected it of you."

Paul got up. He walked across the soft grey carpet to the door. As he approached it he knew it would be locked. He could feel that Joseph was watching him and

that the doctor was not. A plate clinked as the doctor helped himself to another toasted bun. Paul turned away from the door, went to the piano, seated himself at the keyboard.

"As a matter of fact, I *have* made an XPT recording," said Dr. McKay. "My wife and I both have. I'm telling you this in the strictest confidence. I'm not a cheap sensationalist. The tape sleeve bears no clues as to our identity. Also we received no payment. I'm not ashamed, or embarrassed, or anything like that."

"Why are you telling me?"

"From reading, and frank discussion, and a preliminary audition, it became clear that my wife and I achieve a very high degree of—"

"Why are you telling me?"

"I don't want to sound high-minded. If I tell you we did it for the benefit of humanity, that's the plain truth. The recording process was unobtrusive. Our sensibilities were considered in every possible way."

"Otherwise it wouldn't have worked, I suppose?"

"Of course it wouldn't. Such a delicate, transitory experience. Of course it wouldn't have worked."

The blindness of enthusiasm for technique. Paul leaned over the piano. The truth was that the row of black and white keys got in the way of music. Tone should be produced with the inner ear, not with the fingers. Music did not care for fingers.

"Paul?" Joseph had come to stand beside him. "Paul—they want you to play Beethoven. They want you to record what you experience. Issue the tape and the disc together. You see what a fine thing that will be?"

"I only know two kinds of audience; coughing, and non-coughing."

"For the first time people will know what the music is really about. What *you* hear—the ideal you are always pursuing."

"They have a right to buy this with money?"

There was a movement from the direction of the tea things. Paul didn't look up.

"Nobody wants you to make up your mind at once," said the doctor. "The musical experience would of course be far more complete than anything ever known before."

"You're the greatest, Paul. Otherwise they'd never have asked you. It's quite an honour."

"You're being a fool, Joe, Mr. Cassavetes isn't looking for honour."

Paul sat over the keys of the piano, his fingers spread, not quite touching them. He was tired, old, past battling. And the battle with these people would be without end. A battle they didn't even understand. A battle in which argument came through a wall so thick and high that they wouldn't even hear each other's voices properly.

"Mr. Cassavetes, tell me—tell me, do you think I was wrong to make my tape, Mr. Cassavetes?"

"Wrong?"

Paul tried to assemble words to express his soul's revulsion. Just adequate words for saying yes. He struggled and nothing came. He felt his mind fading, the keys of the piano red, the glass pillars holding up the world cracking one by one, each with a separate sound like a toothache. Above the splitting he still tried to explain to Joseph, to explain to McKay. He tried to weep. And they didn't hear him, but ground on. Thousands of them. Mirrorsful of them . . . The keys of the piano were hard, and slightly warm, and stretched away white again like satin ribbon. The side of his face was on them, and he couldn't get it off. Joseph and McKay were talking. They picked him up and put him on the sofa. He felt how easily they lifted him.

Faces, their mouths not moving.

" . . . ebral haemorrhage. Mild, by the look of it."

"Poor fellow. Poor fellow."

At least, he couldn't see them moving.

" . . . affected his mind?"

"Not very likely. A factor to be reckoned with, though."

How would he know if his mind had been affected? The most terrible thing, not to know.

"Paralysis. See—all down the right side."

"Is that why he's dribbling?"

"He may be able to hear us . . . How are you feeling? Mr. Cassavetes, sir, how—are—you—feeling?"

Ice. Ice, crackling, splitting, echoless. Noises. He tried to smile.

"Will he—" quiet—"survive?"

"Of course he will."

"Will he—" quieter—"play again?"

"Probably. Electronic re-education techniques. With co-operation from the patient we can do anything."

Co-operation from the patient.

"It would be a great loss for the world otherwise?"

"We'll get it all back. Never you fear."

Co-operation from the patient.

"I'll phone for an ambulance."

With co-operation from the patient they could do anything . . .

They thought Paul was trembling. They covered him with all sorts of rugs, treating him for shock. He wasn't trembling, he was laughing. And because the face couldn't look amused any more they didn't see it. He laughed on the stretcher all the way down the Cromwellian staircase. He heard his laughter with his inner ear.

He had them beat.

— D. G. COMPTON

*Chris Priest is a young man well-known in British sf circles. Here, in not much more than half a thousand words, he gives a mordant and satirical glimpse of a future*

# IMPASSE

by Chris Priest

The Denebian intruder was dragged before the Field-Marshal.

"We found him skulking around the camp, sir," the young Lieutenant reported. "He was armed, and in possession of several documents."

"I come in peace," the intruder protested in fluent English. "Deneb wants a truce."

The Field-Marshal was a stern, straight-backed man; under a crop of white hair his eyes held a gleam of virility. He leaned forward, and stared intently at the Denebian. "A truce, heh? Then account for the massing of your fleet over our planet, the loss of our cruisers last week, and yesterday's crippling attack on Mars. Now you call for truce. You underestimate my intelligence, friend."

"I credit you with what you have." The Denebian moved towards the desk, away from the Lieutenant's restraining hold. "Earthmen are inferior in every way; their culture, their science, and their customs. To us it is like waging a war with animals. For your own good we offer truce."

"What are the conditions?"

"We ask only one thing: stay in your solar system. Do this, and you will be left in peace. Our battleships will disperse, and your prisoners will be returned."

The Field-Marshal threw his swagger-cane onto the desk in disgust. "Take him away, Lieutenant. How long will it take these stupid apes to realise that they're dealing with human beings! Preposterous!"

The Lieutenant seized one of the intruder's four arms, and pulled him towards the tent-flap.

"Wait." The Field-Marshal got up from behind his desk. "Let him go, Lieutenant. I think we'll free him after all." He looked with evident distaste at the alien. "You go ; and take *my* truce-terms with you. Yes. When you get back to your generals, you tell them from me that they can have peace if they like ; but on Earth's conditions. Unless I get an undertaking within six Earth hours that the Denebian fleet will never again leave the confines of their home solar system, then my fleet will destroy your planets. That'll sort things out."

The intruder looked alarmed. "This is ridiculous. Our ships are poised to strike even now."

"Mine, my dear Denebian enemy, are similarly poised. In fact, unless I personally countermand a specific order before this evening, my fleet will start its action."

The Denebian began to look impatient, as if tired of trying to communicate against such inferiority. "For your information, Field-Marshal, unless I return to our flagship within two Denebian hours, with a signed treaty, of course, then my navy will attack *you*."

The Field-Marshal unclipped his service automatic. "There's an easy answer to that problem," he said.

"Barbarian tactics won't work, either. You see, if I'm killed a relay situated in my adrenalin gland will close, and trigger a biochemical nuclear explosive. In short, to use one of your nauseous expressions, if I go, you go with me."

"Damned clever, aren't you? Your little zombie brains think of everything, eh? Just let me remind you, that if I don't reverse that order tonight . . ."

The Denebian's manner stiffened. "Release me, please. I see no reason why I should waste my time further." The Field-Marshal nodded to the Lieutenant, and the intruder was freed. He walked slowly to the flap, and turned.

"I'll wait outside for a few minutes," he said. "Then if you change your mind about signing . . ." The flap closed, and he disappeared into the bright sunlight.

The Field-Marshal looked at the Lieutenant. "Bluffing?"

The Lieutenant nodded slowly. "In my experience, sir, the Denebians don't have sufficient intelligence to strategise

a boxing match, let alone an interstellar war. They're animals."

The supreme Field-Marshal of the Earth forces chuckled. "You're so right," he said. He retrieved his swagger-cane from the desk, checked the magazine of his automatic, went outside and shot the Denebian.

—CHRIS PRIEST

*Since H. G. Wells' definitive THE INVISIBLE MAN, the subject of invisibility has cropped up many times in science fiction. But we have seldom seen it expanded so wittily (or tied up so neatly) as in this new offering from the versatile Richard Wilson.*

# RICHARD WILSON

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# SEE ME NOT

Avery didn't realize he was invisible until a few minutes after he woke up the second time. He woke the first time at the usual hour, heard his wife say something about getting the kids out of the house so he could sleep and snuggled blissfully back into the pillow. It was the first day of his vacation.

The second time he yawned prodigiously, then was wide awake. He lay on his back for a few minutes, looking at the ceiling. There was something different about the way it looked. No, it wasn't the ceiling that was different, but his view of it. A perfectly clear, unobstructed view. Then he realized that what was missing was the fuzzy, unfocused tip of nose which had always been there, just below the

line of vision, and which became a definite object only when he closed one eye.

Avery closed one eye. No nose. His hand came up in alarm and felt the nose. It was there, all right. That is, he could feel it. But he couldn't see the fingers or the hand.

He shivered and lay still, observing with dubious comfort the shape of his body under the covers and the ridge made by his feet. He brought up his hands. He couldn't see them. He clapped them together. He heard the clap but all he could see was two pyjama sleeves coming almost together at a right angle, then stopping inches away from each other.

He bent the sleeve toward his face and his invisible hand hit him in the chin. He forced himself to look down the empty sleeve. Seeing the emptiness, clear to the elbow, gave him a queasy feeling, as if he were looking down a deep well.

Avery threw back the covers. His wrinkled pyjama legs came into view, but at the end of them—no feet.

It was impossible, Avery thought. Therefore he must be dreaming. But that couldn't be right, either, because whenever he dreamed and realized he was dreaming he woke up. Therefore he was already awake. It was impossible.

He swung his legs off the bed and put his feet on the floor. He could see distinctly the nap of the carpet under them being pressed down.

Now he was facing the big round mirror of his wife's dressing table. The sight of the pyjama-clad nothing, headless, handless and footless, was unnerving. He stripped off his pyjamas and disappeared completely.

The sound of tyres crunching on gravel sent him to the window. It was their car. Liz was back.

He scooped up his pyjamas, then changed his mind about putting them on and tossed them in the closet. Liz mustn't see him like this . . . mustn't not *see* him . . . What he meant, he told himself, was that he must avoid her for a while, till he reappeared, if he was going to, or at least until he knew what had happened to him. He didn't want to scare her half to death.

The front door opened and closed and his wife called: "Hello, Ave? You up?"

She must have heard him moving around.

"I'm up here," he called, going into their daughter's room. "In the bedroom."

He heard her drop bundles on the kitchen table, then start up the stairs. He waited for her to go into the bedroom, then went down the stairs. He almost slipped, not being able to see his feet, then navigated the rest of the way by not looking down. In the process he had closed his eyes and realized that it made no difference. He saw right through the invisible eyelids.

"Where are you?" his wife called from upstairs. "Avery?"

"Uh—down the basement, Liz," he said, going down. "Just checking the oil in the tank."

"Whatever for? It's the middle of summer."

"Well, sure." The concrete floor was cold. He raised one foot, then the other. "But the nights get nippy early in the fall . . ." He banged the side of the tank with his invisible hand, just to be doing something, and looked at the gauge. There were at least a hundred gallons in it.

Liz was coming down the stairs again. He held his breath but she stopped at the first floor and went into the kitchen.

"It's almost lunchtime," she said. "You had a good sleep?"

"Sure did." He ran up the cellar stairs, then back up to the second floor and into the bathroom. He locked the door behind him and leaned against it, panting.

" . . . for lunch?" Liz was saying.

"What?"

"I said what would you like for lunch? Are you upstairs again? For heaven's sake, Ave . . ." He heard her only faintly.

"I'm in the bathroom," he yelled through the door. "Anything at all, thanks. But not right now."

He sat on the edge of the tub but the porcelain was cold. He stood up again.

It was a good thing this had happened to him at home,

he thought. A relatively good thing, that is. It could have been much worse. Suppose he had become invisible on the commuter train? Or at the bank? What a sensation he would have caused in the credit department of the staid Peoples Trust. A conservative business suit sitting there at the desk with nothing inside it. Scare the wits out of even the most desperate loan-seeker. He chuckled.

What would he have done, he wondered. Would he have got out of his clothes and become completely invisible? What an opportunity! All those hundreds of thousands of dollars lying around. But of course he wouldn't do any such thing . . . Besides, he was in the wrong department.

But he wasn't at the office. He wouldn't be going back for two weeks, thank goodness, and they needn't know a thing about it. If this thing wore off in two weeks, that is. What was it, anyway? How was he going to tell Liz? He couldn't stay in the bathroom all day.

A knock at the door made him jump. He hadn't heard her come up the stairs.

"Are you still in there?" she said.

"Just a minute," he said. Was she suspicious? But she went downstairs again.

He ran a bath. He had to have an excuse for monopolizing the place for so long. It would give him time to think.

Avery got into the tub, carefully because he wasn't exactly sure how far to lift his feet as he stepped in, and sat down. The water felt normal on his body, and soothing. But when he looked down he saw the empty place where his body displaced the water. And without the length of his body to give him perspective it seemed a long way from his eye to the surface—which then broke for the circular gap (was he *that* fat around?). The gap looked like a whirlpool without motion, except that it was wide at the bottom and went off in the two tunnels that were his legs.

He looked back up because he was having a touch of vertigo again. He looked at the normal things—the towels on their racks, the supposedly waterproof wallpaper that was beginning to discolour at the lower edges, the tooth-paste tube with the cap off it, the shower head which

leaked and dripped on a bather's back unless he sat well forward.

Liz was at the bathroom door again.

"Honestly, Ave," she said.

"You-can't-come-in-I'm-taking-a-bath," he said quickly. Sneaking up on him like that. Why couldn't she leave him alone till he worked out some kind of solution?

"Oh, really," Liz said. "Since when are you so modest? Unlock the door."

"I can't reach it."

"Nonsense. Of course you can reach it. Come on, now."

"Well—Just a minute." Avery yanked the shower curtain around the tub, then reached out across the sink and unlocked the door. He pulled his arm back inside and closed the gap in the curtain.

He heard Liz come in. "I just wanted to put the clean towels on the shelf."

"Um," he said, waiting for her to go.

There was silence on both sides of the curtain.

"Avery?" she said after a moment.

"Hm?" Why didn't she go?

"You're not taking a shower."

"No."

"Were you taking a shower? No, of course you weren't. The curtain's not wet."

"Mrs. Sherlock Holmes. I'm *going* to take a shower. How about that?"

"But you ran a bath. I heard you."

"I happen to want a bath *and* a shower."

"You're certainly peculiar today. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing." Was she going to stand there all day?

"There's something the matter. Are you sick?"

"No, I'm not sick."

"Then you're hiding something. What are you hiding?"

"Nothing!" he shouted. "Can't a man have a little privacy once in a while? In his own home? He works hard fifty weeks a year and he gets two weeks off and he can't even take a bath?"

"Now I know you're hiding something." Liz's voice was calm, as it always was when she was winning. "Avery?"

"What?" he said sullenly. He could feel the tips of his fingers beginning to shrivel from being in the water too long.

"Avery?" Her voice was soft now and—well, sexy. "Darling?"

"What? What?" Was she sneaking up on the curtain?

"Darling—I feel like taking a shower, too."

"What? You mean now? With me?"

"Why not? It's been a long time since we did, Avery. Remember? And the children are away for the afternoon."

"No!" He exploded the word at her. "You can't! No, Elizabeth!"

"Well!" He could hear her breathing indignantly. "You needn't sound as if I'd made an indecent proposal."

He was sorry instantly that he'd snapped at her. He said so. "I'm sorry, Liz. Of course I didn't mean it that way. It's just—"

"Just what?"

"I—I can't tell you."

"Certainly you can. You can tell me anything . . . Can't you?"

"Ordinarily," he said. "But this is different."

"Different? You mean—Avery, are you *sure* you're not sick?"

"No, I'm not. Not in any way, shape or form. And I haven't been unfaithful to you and picked up a social disease, if that's what you mean."

"I'm relieved to hear it. Then what *is* the matter with you? Don't tell me you went and got yourself tattooed?"

He laughed. Good old Liz. He knew he could tell her now.

"No," he said. "Not tattooed. Liz, can you stand a shock? Sit down someplace."

"What kind of shock? I guess I can stand it, as long as it's not—you know. And as long as you're not sick. I couldn't help thinking of cancer."

"No. Nothing like that. Liz—first I'll tell you and then, when you've adjusted to it somewhat, I'll open the curtain."

"All right," she said. "You've got me a little scared now, I don't mind telling you. I—I think I will sit down."

"Good. Now. Are you ready?"

"I guess I have to be. Go on, Avery."

"Well, when I woke up this morning, the first time I was all right. You saw that. But when I woke up the second time, I was—" he paused and looked at where his crinkled fingertips would have been if he could see them—"invisible."

"Invisible?" There was a pause, then Liz repeated the word with a little gasp, as if she hadn't understood the first time. "Invisible? That's impossible . . ." But she let it trail off, almost with a question mark.

"That's what I thought, but it isn't. At least it happened to me. I don't know how or why, but it did."

"I don't believe it," Liz said. "Open the curtain and let me see you."

He laughed ruefully. "I wish I could. But I'll open the curtain, if you're ready."

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Go ahead." She tried to laugh, too. "Unveil."

He pulled back the curtain.

Liz screamed. She jumped up and stood backed against the wall, as far away as she could get.

Her scream and her attitude scared him, too. "I'm sorry, Liz. I didn't expect it to be that much of a shock."

"But you're not invisible!" she said. "You're dead! You're a ghost!"

"Nonsense!" he said sharply.

"Look at yourself! Look in the mirror!"

He stood and leaned across the sink to look. He saw himself in vague outline. He also saw through himself to the curtained window beyond his reflection.

"It's water vapour," he said, "that's all." He took a towel from the rack and began to dry himself, shivering. As he rubbed and the vapour was absorbed by the towel he began to disappear completely.

Liz was giggling half hysterically. "I'm sorry," she said. "But you looked—awful! I wasn't prepared for that."

Avery finished drying himself. "I'm me," he said. "Just the same old me, only you can't see me. I—I guess I'd better stay away from you till you get used to it."

She was looking toward him but her eyes were focused

on a spot a good foot away from his face. It was disconcerting to Avery to have her looking past him that way. But he imagined he was at least ten times as disconcerting to her.

"You're sure it's not a trick?" Liz said. "You're not playing a joke on me?"

"I wish I were. No, it's no trick. I've disappeared, that's all. I can't explain it."

"We certainly couldn't explain it to the Wormsers," Liz said.

"The Wormsers? What have they got to do with it?"

"We were supposed to go there for dinner tonight. Don't you remember? But we certainly can't go to the Wormsers with you looking like that."

"Don't you mean *not* looking like that?" He was glad to see her practical side coming to the fore. She might easily have panicked completely, but here she was considering the situation in relation to their social life as practically as if his problem were no more than a black eye or a missing front tooth.

He folded the towel and put it back on the rack and saw Liz watching its movements, fascinated. He made sure he did everything slowly. He said: "Now the immediate question is—shall I wear something or nothing? What would be less upsetting to you?"

"I think it would be one of those degrees without a difference. What I really think is that we'd better call Dr. Mike."

"Mike Custer? What for? I'm not sick."

"So you keep saying. But we ought to have an expert opinion. You get into bed and I'll call him."

"Bed? Why bed?"

"Because," Liz said logically, "you're going to be enough of a shock to him as it is. It'll be easier for him if he knows exactly where you are and doesn't have to go chasing around the room after you. Where are you now?"

"Right here. All right, call Mike. Not that I think it's going to do any good."

"No, he hasn't got a fever," Liz was saying on the telephone. "Chills? Are you chilly Ave?"

"I'm warming up now," he said from under the covers.

"Just ask him to come over. No use trying to tell him on the phone."

"... He'll be here in a few minutes," Liz said, hanging up. She regarded the depression on the pillow where a head should have been. "Congratulate me. I can look at you now without getting the wim-wams."

"That's fine, but— Where did you say the kids were? We can't keep it from them forever. How are they going to take it?"

"I don't know. Margie's at dramatics class and Bobby's visiting Corky. Bobby'll be back first."

"He might just take it in stride. Four-year-olds are pretty adaptable. If he can believe everything he sees on television he ought to be able to take his poor old invisible Pop for granted."

"Maybe. Margie's another kettle of fish, though. She's pretty sophisticated for ten, but . . ."

"We could send them both to your mother for a while."

"We'd need a darn good reason," Liz said. "You know Mama and her boy friend situation. She hates to be reminded she's a grandmother. But let's not cross that bridge till we have to. Maybe Dr. Mike can cure you. It might even be something he's studied in one of those journals he's always getting."

"I'd be very much surprised if he has anything in his little bag that's going to do me any good."

A car drove up. "That's him now," Liz said. "Shall I prepare him?"

"No. Let's get our money's worth. I want to see his reaction. Shall I moan? Maybe I should get under the shower and ghost myself up for him?"

"You just stay put. Sometimes I think you don't like Dr. Mike. I'll go let him in."

"It's always been my theory that doctors don't cure anybody of anything. All they do is shoot you full of some antibiotic from our great local industry, Lindhof Laboratories, while Nature heals you in her own sweet time. Except surgeons."

"Let's not get started on that again," Liz said.

Mike Custer's cheerful voice came up the stairs. "Where's the patient? Giving you much trouble, Mrs.

Train? No fever, eh? It's a beautiful day for malingering, isn't it?"

"He's on vacation," Liz said coolly, "so he wouldn't be gold-bricking. He probably has a rare disease."

"The rarer the better. The practice has been a little dull lately. In here?"

"In there," Liz said. "That's him."

"What's he doing all the way under the covers? Not afraid of me, is he?" He boomed out: "Have no fear; Dr. Mike is here!"

"Have no fear yourself," the patient said. "As Liz told you, I have a rare disease."

"What is this, ventriloquism?" the doctor asked. "Parlour tricks? Come, come, Avery, out from under. Why, your children are braver patients."

"I'm right here," Avery said. "Brace yourself, Mike. Your heart all right?"

"Sound as a dollar." Mike thumped his chest. "Sounder."

"Good. Put your hand on the pillow."

"Why? Cold sweats? Is that why you're buried under the blankets on a summer day?"

"Just feel the pillow."

Mike shrugged and put out his hand. It collided with Avery's invisible face. The doctor snatched his hand away and stepped back, sucking in his breath.

"Ave!" Liz said. "You didn't bite him, did you?"

"Of course I didn't bite him. Just scared him, the big bum."

Dr. Mike sat down on the stool of Liz's dressing table. "Whew," he said. "Well." He looked at the pillow and at his hand.

"I'm invisible," Avery said. "That was a dirty trick, but you deserved it. Where'd you pick up your bedside manner, Mike—in the Army?"

"I *was* in the Army," Mike told him, annoyed. "Invisible?"

"Yop," Avery said. "I was in the Army, too, Mike. I walked guard duty in ten-degree weather with a hundred and four fever because they didn't think I had pneumonia. I had it, all right."

"Where was this?"

"Camp Crowder, Missouri."

"Then it couldn't have been me kept you out of the hospital."

"I didn't say it was. I just asked you where you got your bedside manner which, in case nobody ever told you, stinks. Well, I haven't got pneumonia now; I've got invisibility. Can you cure me?"

Liz was trying to suppress a case of the giggles.

The doctor looked at her. "Is he serious? This isn't some elaborate joke?"

"He's serious and *it's* serious. Can you help him?"

"I don't know. It's something that never came up in medical school."

"Well, aren't you going to examine him, or whatever it is you do?"

"Yes, I suppose so, now that I know which end is up. Avery?"

"I'm right here," Avery said. "Same as last time."

"I'll make the examination now."

"Go ahead. I'm not going to bite you."

"Better take your clothes off."

"They are off. Here come the bedclothes now. Steady."

The covers seemed to throw themselves back. All that could be seen of Avery was a long depression in the mattress on his side of the big double bed and a circular dent in the pillow. Wrinkles in the sheet were doubled over and pressed down.

Mike Custer, keeping his eyes on the bed, bent down and snapped open his bag. "We might as well get on with it. Are you lying on your back?"

"At the moment, but I'm getting restless."

"Dear," Liz said, "would it help if we powdered you?"

"If you what?"

"Powdered you all over with my big feather puff. Wouldn't the talcum outline you so Dr. Mike could see what he was doing?"

"You mean the way the water vapour did, in the bathroom? It probably would, if you could stand me looking like a ghost again."

"No." Custer said. "Let's not complicate him with any foreign matter just yet. You *sound* healthy enough—

breathing and all that—but I'll just give you a quick run-over before I take some samples."

"Samples!" Avery said. "If you think I'm going to let you slice off pieces of me to show to your pals——"

"Cut it out, Ave. You know what I mean. Urine, blood——"

"Oh. You mean specimens."

Custer sighed. "I just love it when people tell me my business. Let's start with your chest. Better guide my hand."

Another car crunched into the driveway. Liz looked out the window. "It's Joan returning Bobby. She'll have seen Dr. Mike's car. What'll I say to her? What have you got?"

"Anything. How about Custer's disease? They'll probably name it in Mike's honour."

"I'll think of something." Liz went down.

Avery listened to their voices as Mike plied his stethoscope. He had to hand it to the doctor. Mike had settled down from what must have been a real shock to solid professionalism.

"... just one of those crazy summer colds, I guess," he heard Liz saying to Joan. Then to Bobby as Joan drove off: "You can see Daddy after Dr. Mike is through with him. No, he doesn't hurt. . ."

"There's nothing wrong with you as far as I can see," Mike Custer said. "I mean as far as I can tell. What I mean is that you seem to be all right physically. But of course you're not, are you? I'll go right to the hospital and run a test on the samples—Hey, that's interesting!"

"What?" Avery asked.

"They're reappearing." He took the little stoppered bottles back out of his bag. The dull grey snips from Avery's finger—and toe-nails could be seen clearly. So could the yellow of the urine. But the blood was still invisible.

"Why not the blood, too?" Avery asked.

"I'd better go try to find out."

"Maybe it's because the parings are dead and the urine is waste, but the blood is still alive. Therefore——"

"Maybe," Mike Custer said. "And maybe I should have studied medicine in a bank. Then I'd be as smart as you

are. Therefore. Will you for Pete's sake let *me* be the doctor, Ave?"

"All right. I'll be good."

"And don't worry. There's nothing to indicate that there's anything wrong with you aside from your obvious symptom. And I'm confident we can straighten that out. If it happened, it can unhappen, when we know more about it."

"How long do you think it'll be before you know something?" Avery asked. "I mean the results of the tests."

"A day or two. Meanwhile I'd advise you not to say anything to anybody outside your family. Stay indoors."

"You mean drop out of sight for a few days?"

"That's it—try to keep your sense of humour. But resist the temptation to play practical jokes on people just because you've got the equipment for it."

"It's funny," Avery said, "but I haven't been able to think of a single way to take advantage of it. You'd think I'd be full of ideas."

"Good thing," Mike said. "Then you'll stay out of trouble. I'll go now. Uh—be seeing you."

"Thanks. I hope so."

Bobby ran up the stairs while Liz was seeing the doctor out. "Daddy!" he said. "Did he give you the pink medicine the kind I had?" He was in the bedroom before Liz could catch up with him.

Avery was back under the covers. "Hi, Bob," he said. "I've got a surprise for you, boy."

"What?"

Liz came in, looking anxious, but Avery said, "It's all right, Liz. We've got to break it to him sometime." To his son he said, "I'm playing a game, Bobby. I'm invisible."

"What's imbisible?" Bobby asked. "Is that when you're under the covers?"

"Sort of, son. Did you ever see somebody you couldn't see? Maybe on television?"

"I don't know," Bobby said. He grabbed Avery's foot through the blanket. "I found you."

"Good boy." Avery wiggled his toes and Bobby

laughed. He grabbed the other foot. "Now can you find my head?"

"It's under the covers. Up top."

"Ave!" Liz said. "Don't you think you'd better go easy?"

"Not with old Bobbo Magobbo. He's a big grown up fella, hey, Bob?"

"I'm bigger than Corky," Bobby said. He climbed up on the bed and sat on his father's stomach. "Giddy-ap, Daddy. Ride me on a horse."

"Sure. Up and down. This is a bouncy old horse."

Bobby bounced off. Instead of climbing back on, he sat looking at the bulge Avery made under the blanket. He said, "The horse is in his tent. I want to get in the tent, too."

Liz said promptly, "Time for your nap, Bobby."

"Okay," the boy said. "I'll get under the covers with Daddy."

"No!" Liz's voice sounded a trifle panicky. "Into your own room."

"Now, Liz," Avery said. "Let him alone. There couldn't be a better way for him to find out than in a play situation."

"We can't take a chance. It might leave a scar on his mind that would affect him the rest of his life."

"Nuts. Come on, boy, get under the tent with old horse and we'll gallop off to dreamland. Take your shoes off first."

Bobby pulled off his shoes without untying them and climbed under the covers. Avery had to remove his invisible face quickly to avoid being kicked in it by Bobby's feet. The little boy went under head and all, as his father seemed to be, and his muffled voice said, "Tell me a story, Daddy."

"He'll smother," Liz said.

"Relax, Liz, will you, and let us men take care of each other? I'll see that he doesn't."

"Tell me a story, Daddy," Bobby said again.

"Sure, Bob. But I only tell stories to people who know the magic word."

"Please," Bobby said dutifully.

"That's the word. Well, once upon a time there was a boy named Bobby."

"Me?"

"That's right. Robert Bobby Train; and he was four years old going-on-five. And he was the only boy in the whole world who had an invisible Daddy. Do you know what invisible really means?"

"What?"

"It's like when you turn on Mr. Jolly Jellybean on the television and at first you can hear him but you can't see him."

"It has to warm up," Bobby said. "That's why."

Liz giggled. She sat down on the foot of the bed. "You'll have to do better than that," she said.

Avery sighed. "They're making them too smart these days."

"You're not telling the story," Bobby said.

"That's what I mean. All right. This daddy got invisible and nobody could see him and one day the bad men came on their horses and they rode up to the corral and opened the gates so they could steal the cows from the invisible daddy's little boy's mommy."

Bobby yawned. "I'm going to take my nap now," he announced from under the covers.

"A fine thing," Avery said. "Just when I was getting started."

"You can tell me when I really go to sleep, in the night time," Bobby said.

"It's a deal. Good night, son. Have a good nap."

"G'night." Bobby snuggled his off-blond head onto the pillow, his face away from his father's invisible one, and closed his eyes.

"I love you two," Liz said. She blinked away some tears. "We love you, too," Avery said. "I'm kind of moist-eyed myself, if you could but see. You know what else, though?"

"No; what?"

"I'm hungry."

"Oh, you——"

"Well, consider. I haven't even had breakfast, what with all the goings on."

Avery felt very alone when Liz had gone. He sat up carefully to avoid disturbing Bobby and leaned forward to look into the mirror over the dressing table. It was almost a new shock, though he knew perfectly well what to expect, to prove to himself again that he had no reflection. He reached out and picked up Liz's hairbrush to make the proof positive. It was even more eerie to see the reflection of the brush seem to levitate itself than to watch the object itself, which was solid in his hand.

He gave a short sigh and tossed the brush back to the table. He got out of bed and walked around the room. He misjudged the distance between his invisible shin and a chair and banged himself painfully. He sat down and cursed for half a minute, senselessly and repetitively, rubbing his shin.

He stopped when it occurred to him to see if there was a visible black and blue mark on the invisible shin. There wasn't. Then he thought to look for the tiny wound in the ball of his left ring finger where Mike Custer had taken the blood sample. He could feel the sensitive area but found it impossible to judge how far to hold his invisible finger away from his invisible face so as to be able to see anything in focus, if there was anything to see.

He went to the mirror and put the tip of the finger against the glass but even then he wasn't sure exactly where to look.

He solved the problem by dipping the finger into a box of Liz's face powder. There, in the faint pink circle, was a tiny clot of brown blood.

He remembered Mike's jibes at his layman's theorizing but followed his thought through. His blood had remained invisible long after his urine and nail parings had reappeared. But now, less than an hour later, his blood was visible, too. Was it clotting that did it? Then he remembered having read somewhere that blood was a colourless liquid to start with, and that the colour came from haemoglobin. But he couldn't remember what haemoglobin was. And what was clotting, anyway—a chemical change? Probably Mike was right—he should leave the doctoring to doctors.

Avery's reflections went no further because Bobby

woke up. Avery considered making a dash to get back under the covers, but sat still. He didn't want to scare the boy to death.

Bobby sat up. "I can't sleep," he said. "I'm too old for naps."

Avery said nothing. He thought of tiptoeing out of the room, but remained still.

"Ain't I, Daddy?" Bobby said.

Avery resisted the temptation to correct the "ain't". Where were the kids getting their atrocious speech habits? Even Margie, presumably protected by a belt of suburbs from big-city barbarisms, had shocked him during a recent family breakfast. Avery had run short of lunch money and had asked Liz for a dollar. Margie, apparently fearing her allowance was threatened, had said: "You ain't gonna hock no money offa me!"

Those were the good old days, Avery thought, when his children's grammar was his big concern.

"You're not so invisible, Daddy," Bobby said. "I know where you're hiding."

"Where?" It slipped out.

"On Mommy's stool."

Avery's naked skin prickled. "How do you know?"

"I can hear you breathing," Bobby said, "and the seat is all pushed down, too."

"Oh." Avery sighed in relief. "I'm glad it's that simple. I thought for a minute you had second sight, you old Bob. One sideshow exhibit in the family's enough."

"What's a sideshow, Daddy?"

"That's where funny people are. Giants and fat ladies and sword swallowers and—invisible people. What do you think about your invisible daddy, boy? You worried about it?"

"Nah."

"Do you think it's fun?"

"Sure. Can I be imbisible too?"

"I hope not. You're hard enough to keep track of sometimes just the way you are."

"I don't go out on the road, Daddy."

"I know you don't, Bobby. You're a good boy." Avery took a deep breath. "Come on over and shake hands with your invisible daddy."

"Okay." Bobby scrambled out from under the covers and dropped backwards off the side of the bed, onto Avery's foot. He apologized. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

Avery got a little choked up and realized he was in something of an emotional state. "That's all right, Bobby. Want to shake your old invisible daddy's invisible hand?"

"Sure."

Avery forced his hand out to meet the one that Bobby unhesitatingly offered. The boy grasped it and shook it up and down. He giggled.

"What's so funny?" his father asked.

"Corky doesn't have an imbisible daddy."

"That's right."

"Corky's daddy has a jeep, though. Why can't we have a jeep?"

"We can't have everything," Avery said. "Which would you rather have?"

Bobby considered it. "An imbisible daddy *and* a jeep."

Margie came banging into the house. "Where is everybody? I went swimming in the Vogel's new pool. It cost two thousand dollars. I got my hair wet. Can we afford a swimming pool? Are you all upstairs?"

"That girl," Liz said admiringly. "At least we don't have to worry about *her*. We're up here, honey!"

"If you mean I'm not going to be a shock to her, you're crazy," Avery said. He handed Liz his plate and slid down under the covers, grumbling, "Why couldn't this have happened in the wintertime, if it had to happen. It's hot under here. Take it easy, now, Liz. Margie's not all *that* sophisticated."

"Don't worry—I've got the door locked."

Margie was already banging on it. "Hey! Everybody gone back to bed?"

Liz said: "Before I open the door I want to prepare you. Daddy's the only one in bed. He's got something the matter with him."

"Oh. That's too bad. Want me to call the doctor?"

"Dr. Mike's already seen him. I'll open the door now."

Margie, who had straight blonde hair and looked closer to thirteen than ten, came in on tiptoe.

"How do you feel, Daddy? What are you doing all the way under the covers? Do you feel cold?"

"I'm all right," Avery said. "It's just that I'm invisible."

Margie laughed. "That's silly. Nobody's invisible. Let me see."

"That's just it." Avery said. "You can't. Hey. Don't do that!"

Margie had pulled back the covers. Her eyes bulged and her mouth opened. Then her eyes rolled up in their sockets and she gave a little moan and collapsed.

Liz grabbed her before she could hit the floor. "Now look what you've done," she said. "My poor baby! Help me get her onto her bed. No, don't. That would really be too much for her if she came to again. Get some water."

Avery brought a glass of water and a wet washcloth from the bathroom and held them out to Liz, who had got Margie onto her own bed. Liz was sitting on the edge of it, rubbing her daughter's wrists. Liz gave a little shriek.

"Don't sneak up on people," she said. "Especially when you're holding things." She took the wash cloth and folded it across Margie's forehead. "Put the glass on the night table and get out of here."

"I'll go visit my son," Avery said. "He accepts me, at least."

"Don't you dare wake him up. I couldn't stand it to come in and find him sitting on an invisible lap again—four inches above the chair! That boy!"

"He's adaptable," Avery said. "I'll say that for him."

"Scoot," Liz said. "I think she's coming around."

Late afternoon sunlight poured through the living room windows and dust motes danced in its beams.

"Don't stand *there*," Liz told Avery. "I can see you in outline. I mean—where the dust stops, that's you."

"It's all right, Mother," Margie said. She was leaning back on the couch, her feet up on the coffee table. "I think I'm getting used to it."

"Thanks, friend," Avery said. "How do you feel now? Your colour's coming back. Wish I could say the same for me."

"I'm okay. It was pretty silly to faint, wasn't it?"

"Perfectly feminine thing to do. Where's Bobby?"

"Out playing imbisible cowboy," Liz said. "He's all right."

"I know he's all right. I just wanted to know where he was. Hadn't you better call the Wormsers, Liz, and tell them I'm indisposed? And cancel the baby sitter. We'll have a quiet family evening at home."

"We'll have an evening at home," Liz said, "but I don't know how quiet it'll be." She went to the phone.

"What do you want to do tonight, Daddy?" Margie asked. "Where are you now, by the way?"

"In the armchair. Oh, we could play Monopoly or something."

Margie giggled. "You'd *cheat*."

"I would not."

"And nobody could tell. You'd steal thousand-dollar bills from the bank."

He laughed, glad the girl was beginning to accept his condition.

Dinner was not a success. It was bad enough to watch the knife and fork apparently manipulating themselves (though Bobby kept giving yelps of delight) but Avery could see that Liz found it revolting to watch the food being chewed by invisible teeth and travelling down an invisible gullet.

"I just can't stand it," Liz said. She started to get up.

"Me, too," Margie said. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

"No," Avery said. "I'll go." He took his plate upstairs. He sat at the dressing table and ate, watching the reflection of the process in fascination. But then the downward procession of masticated food and its visible accumulation in his invisible stomach began to make him ill. He put down his fork and turned away from the mirror.

"Steady," he told himself.

When he was sure his dinner would stay down he went to the closet and took out slacks and a long-sleeved sport shirt. From his dresser he took knee-length socks, a bandanna, to help cover the neck, and gloves. He dressed and when he heard the clatter of dishes being washed he took his plate and went downstairs. He paused to look in the hall mirror. Except for the fact that he was headless he felt that he looked rather well.

At the kitchen door he asked: "Can I come in? I put on some clothes."

"Thanks for the warning," Liz said. "Everybody ready for Daddy? Sure, come on in."

Good old Bobby, who was still eating his dessert, looked at him and laughed. "Daddy doesn't have no head."

"Any head," Avery said automatically.

But he wasn't making such a hit with the womenfolk. Margie moved closer to Liz and murmured, "Oh, Mommy—"

Liz carefully put down a platter she had been drying. "Better take them off," she said. "You look like the Invisible Man."

"I am the Invisible Man. But I can't take them off till I've digested my dinner. Besides, it's getting chilly."

Bobby went to bed. Liz, Avery and Margie played half a game of Monopoly, then Margie went to bed.

Avery lit a cigarette and leaned back in the armchair. Liz watched the spectacle. "I suppose it'd be worse with a pipe. Ave, what are you going to do?"

"Do? What do you want me to do? Take up a life of crime? Offer my services to the FBI? Become a spy in Moscow? What do you mean, do?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean, Avery Train. I mean right here. You can't go around invisible for the rest of your life."

"I suppose I could if I had to." The cigarette between the invisible lips moved and pointed at her. "Oh. Of course. You mean it's rough on you. Would—would you want a divorce if it keeps up?"

"What a thing to say! I was thinking of you—not me. When I married you I took the A Train, as our humorous friends are fond of pointing out, and I have no intention of getting off till the last stop."

Avery's invisible hand—he'd removed the cumbersome gloves during the Monopoly game—took the cigarette and mashed it out.

"You're an angel, Liz," he said, moved. "I'd come over and give you a big kiss if I thought it wouldn't be a traumatic experience for you."

"Later," Liz said.

And later, in bed, in the dark, there were moments of forgetting. And then, remembering again, Avery heard his wife murmur, "For me, now, you're complete. Maybe in the morning . . ."

But Bobby cried in his sleep, then woke and ran from his room to theirs and climbed onto their bed.

"What's the matter, old Bob?" his father asked. He lifted the boy in the protective darkness and slid him under the covers.

"An imbisible bad man chased me."

"It was just a dream, Bobby," Liz said, reaching across Avery to stroke the boy's forehead.

"I know it," Bobby said. He wriggled against his father and went back to sleep.

Avery struggled up out of sleep. Bobby was sitting on him, bouncing and talking to himself.

"What?" Avery said. "Get off me, you cowboy."

"Daddy's got whiskers."

Avery ran his hand over his cheek. So he had. Stood to reason, though. He hadn't shaved yesterday and his beard grew fast. It would have been a gory business, shaving an invisible face . . .

Then he realized he had seen the hand that felt the beard.

"Hey!" he said. "I came back!"

Bobby was looking straight at him, not merely in his general direction.

"Hey, Bob! You haven't got an invisible daddy any more."

"Nope."

Avery laughed. "Right! You're a genius, boy. Liz, wake in the victory sign. "How many fingers?"

"One-two," Bobby said. "Two."

Avery laughed. "Right! You're a genius boy. Liz, wake up. I'm back!"

"Mmh?" She rolled over and opened her eyes. "Morning. You need a shave."

"Really?" He was delighted. "What makes you think so?"

"I can see, can't I?" She sat up. "I can see? I can see

you, Avery! You're back!" She ran a hand over his bristly face.

"Exactly the way I put it. We've got to celebrate. While I shave, Liz, why don't you make us a big family breakfast."

She groaned and dropped back on the pillow.

"... Pancakes and sausages," he said. "And a platter of eggs, sunny side up. Old-fashioned oatmeal and a big pitcher of milk and fresh coffee and fresh orange juice and—what else, Bobby?"

"Corn flakes."

"Right. With strawberries and cream. Up, good wife! Hie thee to the kitchen."

"I'll up you," she said. "We haven't got half those things in the house. How about *you* celebrating by taking *us* all out to a restaurant for this big old-fashioned family breakfast, if you're so crazy for it?"

"Why not? It's an occasion. Waffles, too, with butter and maple syrup. Everybody up! Margie!" He shouted into their daughter's room. "Wake up! Your old pappy's back!"

But when they had dressed Liz became doubtful. "Much as I'd like a respite from the old hot-stove routine," she said, "do you think it's safe?"

"Safe?" Avery asked. "How do you mean, safe?"

"I mean how do you know it's permanent? Maybe we should check with Dr. Mike first."

"We'll drop in on him after breakfast, if you like. I'm hungry, woman. I barely ate at all yesterday. Let's go."

Avery disappeared again as he was swabbing up syrup with his last bit of pancake. Even so, they might have managed to sneak out but Bobby, noisily proud, hollered, "Hey, look! My daddy got imbisible again!" That not only called attention to it, but put a public name to the phenomenon.

The waitress screamed when she saw the man in the summer suit without head or hands and she dropped three plates of eggs. And so everybody in the Hearth and Home Restaurant saw, and within minutes the whole town knew.

A dozen people had surrounded their car as they got into it.

"*You drive, Liz, for God's sake,*" Avery said as she started to get in the passenger door.

And Margie didn't help matters by saying in her best pre-adolescent wail: "Oh, I'm so humiliated!"

A crowd collected, as one will at the hint of anything unusual. People ran out of stores and office buildings. Liz started the engine and raced it and blew the horn to force her way through. People pressed close to the windows and pointed and shouted to each other as Avery huddled down in the front seat. Liz found an opening and roared the car away from the kerb.

People scattered, some going to their own cars to tag along. But Liz had theirs up to sixty within seconds, discouraging immediate pursuit. Nevertheless there was a cluster of cars around their house when they reached it. Two of the cars were in the drive-way. Word had obviously preceded them by telephone.

"I can't get in," Liz said. "We're blocked off."

"Drive across the lawn," Avery said. "The hell with the grass. Oh-oh, that's Schreiber's car."

Schreiber was a photographer-reporter on the local paper.

"We'll fix him," Liz said. "Margie, you cover Mr. Schreiber while we get Daddy in the house. Make believe his camera is a basketball and you keep between it and Daddy. Don't let him take a picture—but be careful not to hurt the camera."

"Sure," Margie said. "That'll be fun."

"Good." They were as close as they could get to the front door. "Okay, here we go."

Schreiber was aiming his camera and three or four other people were converging on them when all four doors of their sedan flew open.

Margie dashed up to the photographer.

Liz ran with Bobby to the front door and unlocked it.

A pair of pants came running out of the car and into the house. Liz slammed the door.

The pants sat down on a chair and their beltline heaved in and out.

"What was that for?" Liz asked. "Did you have to make an exhibition of yourself?"

"I thought I'd have time to get them all off," Avery

said. "You'd better call Margie in. She's still playing touch tackle with poor Schreiber."

Margie slipped through the door and Liz slammed it in the photographer's face. "Go away," she said. "No pictures. Leave us alone."

"More cars are coming," Margie announced. "Hundreds of them."

It was an exaggeration, but cars were arriving in considerable numbers. A crowd collected on the lawn but only a few people approached the house. Schreiber tried to peer in a window and was joined by two strangers. One of them caught sight of the pair of pants sitting on the chair and said, "There it is! I see it!" and waved to others behind him to come look. Schreiber aimed his camera.

Liz yanked down the shade and yelled: "If you don't go away I'll call the police!"

Avery realized that his hands were shaking. He felt besieged. He steadied his hands on the arms of the chair and the shaking transferred itself to his body. He went into the kitchen and looked out the window there. Nobody was at that part of the house yet. He paced up and down, then opened the cupboard where Liz kept what she called the cooking whisky.

The bottle shook in his invisible hand as he read what it said on the label about the grain neutral spirits. This information failed to take his mind off his problem and he unscrewed the cap. He took a swallow, sputtered, then took another. He screwed the cap back, then unscrewed it and took another drink.

He felt better. All of a sudden he began to see that there was a funny side to the situation. It was *they* who should be scared of *him*. Him, the invisible menace. He marched back to Liz.

"I'll take my pants off and go tweak a few noses," Avery told his wife. He took off his pants and underpants and was completely invisible again. "That ought to scatter 'em."

"You'll do no such thing," Liz said. "They're the ones who are creating the disturbance. I don't want you blamed."

Avery didn't answer her.

"Avery! Where are you?" A window in the front room opened and closed and Liz rushed to it. A voice said

faintly, "About time I got some fun out of this thing."

"Ohh." Liz picked up the telephone and dialled Police.

Avery found it exhilarating to walk unseen in a crowd. There weren't so many people that he had trouble avoiding them. Their eyes looked mostly at the house but flickered around occasionally as if apprehensive. He could sense a thrill of the unknown in the faces and wondered how close they were to fear or panic.

He made his first experiment with a heavy-set stranger who was standing solidly in Liz's petunia patch. Avery moved to within a few feet of him and said softly, "You're trespassing, you know. We petunias don't go for that."

The solid man gave a shiver and turned his head left, then right. He stepped out of the petunia patch, then made a grab with both arms. He had grabbed in the wrong direction and Avery moved away as the man began to yell:

"Here he is! Over here!"

Half a dozen people headed toward the man, two of them running, the rest walking cautiously. Avery sprinted away. At the back of the house a woman he recognized as Miss Barksdale, the spinster who had the real estate agency in town, was peering in the curtained kitchen window. Avery resisted an urge to plant a kick on her fat rump. Instead he reached invisibly over her shoulder and opened the top half of the window.

He said in her ear, "That should give you a clearer view, Miss Barksdale."

The woman whirled and her face turned white. Avery hoped she wasn't going to faint but didn't wait to see. He returned to the front of the house, to where a group of men had spaced themselves along the border of the lawn with the road.

Avery pulled back the branch of a young tree and let it snap at the nearest of the men. As it caught him in the chest Avery yelled, "Get off my property!"

The man the branch had hit looked less startled than Avery had hoped. He said purposefully to the next man in line, "Oh, he wants to play. This guy could be dangerous. Let's get him before he really hurts somebody."

The line of men joined hands and began to run across

the lawn, toward the house. Avery had to sprint to avoid being caught immediately. He felt a surge of fear. These men were hunting him, as if he were an animal!

In an instant his position had switched from that of an indignant householder chasing people off his property to that of a weird creature being run to earth.

Avery made the mistake of looking down. Not seeing his feet made him stumble. As he fell he tried to roll to a spot between two of the men in the running human chain. But a foot caught him painfully in the ribs and he cried out. Immediately the line of men threw themselves to the ground in the general vicinity of his cry. Their numbers made his capture inevitable.

"I got him!" one said, and the others rushed over and piled on as if in a football game.

Avery fought back in panic but he was pinned and overwhelmed. He stopped struggling. "Okay," he said. "I give up. Watch where you put those big feet."

"Try to scare people to death, will you?" one of the men said. "You goddamn freak." He said to the others, "I've got one arm. The left one, I think. Yeah. Let's get his arms and legs and spread-eagle him."

They were rough about it and Avery realized that mob violence could be very close to the surface, even in his home town. It frightened him to see the contorted, straining face of the man kneeling on his chest and to know that the last time he had seen him he had been the mild-mannered checker at the super-market.

They were holding him down on his back, pulling at his arms and legs from four directions. Avery knew they probably had no intention of hurting him seriously, but he felt it would not have taken much more provocation for them to get carried away enough to maim or kill him—maybe by accident, maybe not.

The crowd, grown now to fifty or more, formed an ominous circle around him.

"Look!" somebody said. "I can see part of him. He's green!" The crowd murmured and pressed closer.

"That's right," one of the men holding him said. "It's where the grass rubbed off on him. Here, Joey, take over my hold and I'll rub some more grass on him. His face ought to be . . . about here."

Liz ran out of the house, screaming, and battered at backs with her fists to be let through the crowd.

One of Avery's captors was roughly applying a stain of green to his face when the police arrived, sirens wailing.

From his bedroom window Avery could see the deep tyre scars in the soft lawn, now free of cars, and the two officers near the parked police vehicles, keeping traffic moving along the road.

Avery was still shaking a little. He wore a bathrobe and sat in a chair and when he looked in the mirror he could see the pale green outline of his face below the hairline, looking like a mask suspended over the empty neck of the robe.

Two other men were in the room with Avery and Liz. One was the doctor, Mike Custer. The other Avery knew by sight as Lieutenant Winick of the township police. The children had been banished to their rooms with strict orders to stay there, and stay quiet.

"I told you not to go out," Mike Custer said. "They sure roughed you up. You're going to be sore for the next few days."

"Why didn't you arrest them?" Liz asked the lieutenant. "The sadists!"

Lieutenant Winick sat regarding Avery with a mixture of fascination and uncertainty. "In my business you get used to damn near anything. I'm sorry, Mrs. Train, if I don't sound sympathetic, but how do you think those people out there felt? Just think what he could do if he had a mind to do it."

"If you'd let me wash my face," Avery said, "I wouldn't look so much like a spook. I'm just a quiet, law-abiding citizen who woke up a freak one morning and I resent it. I also resent having people trample all over Liz's garden while they try to get a look at the monster. So I took my little revenge. If I'd been visible I'd have taken a baseball bat to them. Wouldn't you?"

Winick had a pad in his hand. "I wouldn't be in your shoes for a thousand bucks. Next could come the FBI. For all I know this is a federal case, with security angles."

Liz said angrily, "My husband's not a criminal."

"At the very least," he said with a flash of humour, "he

was disturbing the peace. That puts him in the public domain."

"The mob put him there," Liz said, still angry.

"He put himself there when he went around sneaking up on people, even if they were on your property. If you'd called us first, we'd have cleared them off and there wouldn't have been any trouble."

"It's true, Liz," Avery said. "I guess he's right."

"That's the attitude to take, Mr. Train," Winick said. "We'd better know as much as we can. The Press is going to be calling up from all over creation and if we can give them some of the answers you'll be bothered that much less. I'm surprised your phone isn't ringing already."

"It's off the hook," Liz said.

"Good." The lieutenant turned to a new page in his notebook. "Now, Mr. Train, when did you first realize you were—I guess we'll have to use the word—invisible? There doesn't seem to be any other."

"Yesterday morning," Avery said. He answered questions and watched the pages of the notebook fill.

When Lieutenant Winick had gone, leaving one of the police cars on guard at the front of the house, Mike Custer said:

"Now would you like to know what I've learned about you at the lab?"

"I'd like to know whether those cops are down there to keep people out or to keep me in."

"A little of both, possibly," Mike said. "Listen, Avery, I have a colleague who'd very much like to see you. He'll only be in the country a little while—"

"Where's he from?"

"He's the foremost Latin-American specialist in tinctorial abnormalities of the blood."

"Oh? Is that what I've got?"

"It's too early to tell what you've got. Will you let him examine you?"

"Sure. And to show what a Good Neighbour I am I won't even charge him admission."

"Now, Avery," Liz said.

"Now, Avery," he mimicked. "As the only tinctorial abnormality north of the border I guess I have a right to

be temperamental. Is that what you learned about me in the lab, Mike, that I'm abnormal? I could have told you that."

"Stop it, Avery," his wife said. To the doctor she said, "Ask your colleague to come over, Dr. Mike. Don't mind Avery. He's had a trying time."

"He's just outside," Mike said. He went to the window and waved to one of the policemen, who let a small, dapper man through the little knot of people still gathered just beyond the Trains' property.

"This is Dr. José Ramíndez Oaca," Mike said. "Mr. and Mrs. Avery Train."

Oaca came in on the balls of his feet, it seemed to Avery. He stared at the green mask in total fascination, ignoring Liz's offered hand.

"Ah, ah, ah!" he exclaimed. He turned to Mike Custer, hands gesturing ecstatically. "Can you believe it, my friend? Can you believe there is such a phenomenon here within a few miles of the Laboratories? Here, in this sleepy little town only a stone's throw from our research? My friend, I am deeply, deeply obligated."

"What Laboratories?" Avery growled suspiciously.

"Laboratories doing magnificent work in many little-known fields barely suspected by the layman."

Avery turned his green face toward Mike, who looked a little uncomfortable. "What Laboratories?" Avery demanded.

"Lindhof," Mike said shortly.

"Lindhof!" Avery said. "You, my friend, would turn me over to a Lindhof man, knowing what I think of them? Those commercial medicine men? Purveyors to a pill-ridden populace!"

Avery shook his green mask. Lindhof Laboratories—purveyors of invisibility now, if he let them use him as a guinea pig. He had begun to appreciate the powers inherent in invisibility—and they were mostly for no good.

Oaca had glided to within steps of Avery, still in a transport of delight and apparently oblivious to Avery's outburst.

"Dr. Oaca is a good man, Avery," Mike Custer said. "You'll have to take my word for it."

Liz said, "Do you think anything can be done for him?"

Oaca seemed to notice her for the first time. "I am certain, madam. But we must enlist his co-operation."

Liz said pleadingly to her husband, "Avery, let him try."

"I'll submit to an examination," Avery said sullenly, "But I'll want to have a good long talk with Mike before I go any further."

"Excellent," Oaca said. "First, then, wash, to achieve a complete lack of tinctoriality. The conditions would be inexact otherwise."

Avery suppressed a grudging admiration for Dr. Oaca, who seemed to know what he was up to, and showed his resentment at being ordered around.

"Listen, Dr. Oaca—" he began.

"Please, Mr. Train. Off with the green."

Avery went away, muttering. When he came back from the bathroom, tingling from the scrubbing he'd given himself, Oaca was perched on the edge of the bed, talking.

"... from tribe to tribe. So you see they do achieve a sort of invisibility, at least for themselves. A person from outside would see him, of course, but not for long because the outsider would be killed. So for their purpose, at least, they have achieved invisibility and we cannot say it does not exist. The case of your husband, now, is likely of a different kind, though we must not rule out any possibility. Ah. Mr. Train, you are with us again. Good. Remove the robe, please, and place yourself prone upon the bed."

"Are you implying that I'm psychosomatic?" Avery asked, continuing to stand. "That this is all autohypnosis? Because if you are—"

"Avery," Mike cut in. "Will you kindly lay off the jargon? Just get down on your stomach, as the doctor asked."

"I know what prone means," Avery said haughtily. He took off the robe and had the satisfaction of seeing Dr. Oaca move back a bit as he disappeared completely. Avery lay down, prone. He saw Dr. Oaca approach and felt his fingers on his buttocks.

"Kindly elevate yourself by bringing up your knees," Oaca said.

Avery elevated his backside. "What for?"

"For the sake of scientific progress, Mr. Train," Oaca

said. Avery saw him take a swab out of his bag, then felt a tingle as something was applied to his bottom.

"Now, listen—" Avery started to say.

"See?" Oaca said to Mike. "It appears!"

"True," Mike said. "But how is that different from the grass stains?"

"The world's own difference," Oaca said. "Grass has colour of its own; this does not. Come; back to the Laboratories."

"How about me?" Avery asked. "Can I de-elevate now?"

"Yes, yes," Oaca said. The Latin-American seemed to have lost interest in him, now that he had his smear, or whatever it was. "Come, Dr. Custer. There is much to be done."

"And then will I be cured?" Avery asked. He was beginning to feel like the guinea pig he had fought against being.

"Can't promise anything," Mike said shortly. "But keep your fingers crossed. I'll get in touch with you."

"Thanks," Avery said bitterly. "Oh, thanks a bunch."

They tried putting the phone back on the hook.

The first caller was a Miss Ethel Sturbridge, who lived in a house down the road with her spinster sister. Avery said, "Yes, Miss Sturbridge . . . No, Miss Sturbridge . . . No, ma'am—it wasn't me . . . Of course I'm sure. I wouldn't do a thing like that . . . Yes, Miss Sturbridge . . . Yes. Thanks for calling. Good-bye."

"What's with the Misses Sturbridge?" Liz asked.

"They suspect a peeping tom. I assured her it wasn't me. Why anybody would want to peep at those two dried-up old biddies I can't imagine."

The next caller was a hoarse-voiced man who wouldn't identify himself.

"You the guy they can't see?" he asked.

"That's me."

"Well, I got the perfect layout for us if you're interested. You know the bank in Long Ridge? It's got those low counters? A set-up."

"You mean a stick-up?" Avery asked.

"No, no. You just climb over the counter, quiet. No-

body sees you. Then when the teller steps away from his cash drawer you take out the money. Slip it to me across the counter when nobody's looking. I'll be sort of standing around."

"Who is this?"

"Never mind yet. First you got to say you're in with me."

"Of course I'm not in with you. I work in a bank myself."

"All the better. Then you know how things work. Look, I'd like to get together with you. This could be the cinch of the world."

"No, thanks," Avery said. "But thanks for calling." He hung up.

"What was that all about?" Liz asked.

"Just an offer to rob the bank in Long Ridge. Some nut. I could do a thousand times better robbing my own bank, if that's what I wanted to do."

"It's nice to know you're in demand."

"But look who by. Crooks and a profit-happy pill factory that takes a couple of cents worth of chemicals and sells it for ten bucks."

The phone rang again and a childish voice chanted the jingle about the little man who wasn't there. Avery said as he hung up. "I'm not going to answer it any more, that's all."

Liz took the next call. "It's NBC Television," she said. "What could they possibly want?"

"Something about a guest appearance tonight."

"Appearance? Who knows when I'll appear?"

"They don't mean you have to be visible. You know what they mean."

"How can you photograph nothing? You don't want me to go, do you? Haven't we had enough publicity for one day? Tell them no."

The phone rang again immediately after Liz hung up. "Don't answer it," Avery said, but she already had.

"Oh, hello, Joan. . . . Hectic isn't the word for it. . . . You will? You're a doll, Joan. Thanks a million." Liz said to Avery: "Joan's going to take the kids for the rest of the day. I'll run them over there. They've been awfully good, though."

"They've been too quiet, if you ask me. Margie! Bobby! What are you doing?"

A door opened upstairs. "We're coming," Margie's voice said. "Go on, Bobby, show them." Bobby giggled.

The boy was naked and green from head to foot. "Nobody can't see me," he announced. "I'm the imbisible boy." Margie's dress was stained and her hands were green.

"Bobby!" Liz cried. "Margie! What have you been up to? Look at him!"

"It's only green chalk and water colour," Margie said.

"I'm imbisible, like Daddy," Bobby said.

"Up to the bathroom!" Liz said. "You, too, young lady. You start a tub running. Oh! Honestly, Avery, I don't know which is worse—your problem or its side effects."

Liz was still looking harassed when she came back from taking the children to Joan's. "Running the gauntlet of police just to get in and out of your own driveway," she said. "Honestly, it's too much."

It didn't help her state any to come into the living room and see the telephone suspended in air and a cigarette puffing away a few inches from the mouthpiece. It never stopped being something of a shock to be confronted anew with proof of his invisibility.

Avery was saying: ". . . when you said 'lab' I didn't know you were talking about Lindhof. I thought you meant the lab at the hospital."

"Who is it?" Liz asked. "Dr. Mike?"

Avery nodded, forgetting that Liz couldn't see a nod till she repeated the question.

"Yes," he said to her, then into the telephone: "No, I wasn't agreeing with *you*. That was Liz. . . . She's fine. A little ragged around the edges but bearing up. As for me, I thought about it, Mike, and Lindhof is out."

"Lindhof Laboratories," Mike said, "happens to be the foremost organization in the field of tinctorial research."

"I thought Dr. Oaca was the authority," Avery said.

"He's working very closely with Lindhof on an exchange fellowship. Lindhof has been on the trail of invisibility for years, if you must know. As a matter of fact—" Mike's

voice dropped conspiratorially "—they have a grant from the Pentagon."

"You don't have to be so melodramatic. There are no Russian spies on the extension."

"I'm just trying to show you this is no wild-hare project. Lindhof gets its money from one of those bills the House Appropriations Committee passes in closed session. Frankly, they're excited about your case at Lindhof and they'd like to see you."

"If they could see me," Avery said sourly, "they wouldn't give me the time of day."

"Don't be semantic. Will you come with me to Lindhof? The best minds in the hemisphere are there to help you. If anyone can solve your problem, they can."

"Solve whose problem? They don't care about me—Avery Train. They just care about the patents and government contracts they'd get if they produced an invisible man of their own making. But I'm not of their making and I'm not going to let them take credit for me. I'm an accident—a sport, biologically speaking—"

"Frankly," Mike said, "I'm getting sick and tired of you quoting to me out of the latest selection of the Science Book Club."

"And I'm getting tired of hearing you tout for Lindhof. The last I read about them, they were being sued for a million dollars because their polio vaccine was contaminated and killed somebody instead of immunizing him."

"You're a layman," Mike said patiently. "There's more to these things than you read in the papers."

"I'm an invisible layman, though. That's what makes me valuable to Lindhof. And I don't want any part of them."

"Listen, you pig-headed fool. You're not in the least valuable to Lindhof any more and they could very well not want any part of you. They don't need you—you need them. They've got the problem licked. You're just its proof. At this very moment you're unique in your invisibility but tomorrow you could be only one in a dozen. The big difference is that the other eleven will be able to turn it on and off, but you'll be stuck with it."

"You mean they can control it?" Avery asked.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. I've done all I can for you as your personal physician and I admit it's not enough. I haven't got the equipment. Lindhof has. It's that simple."

"Damn Lindhof."

"All right," Mike said. "Damn them. But if you persist in your attitude you'll persist in your invisibility. Good-bye, Avery."

"Good-bye."

Liz watched the phone seem to slam itself down.

"Well," she said. "you sure told him off."

"Yeah."

"And that got you somewhere?"

"I don't know where it got me, but I'm not going to be one of Lindhof's guinea pigs."

"Not even if they cure you in the process?"

"No."

"You mustn't be so stubborn, Avery. You've got to think of your family, too. I don't want to go through another day like today—"

"You don't want to go through another day!" he exploded. "You talk as if you were the one who got beat up!"

"That happens to be what I meant," Liz said. "My concern for you—Oh, skip it. If you want to be a stubborn, invisible fool, go ahead."

She went out. In a few minutes he heard the sewing machine going like mad. That was one of Liz's ways of working off excess emotion.

But a few minutes later he heard her dialling. He wondered who she was calling. He listened but couldn't hear what she was saying. After a few minutes she hung up. The phone rang almost immediately.

"Hello?" he heard her say in a normal voice. "Who? *Life*? Yes?" There was a silence. Then she called: "Avery, it's *Life Magazine*. Something about some exclusive pictures. They emphasize 'exclusive'."

"Tell them to go to hell," Avery yelled down the stairs. "Tell them I'm a Democrat."

"He says to tell you he's a Democrat," Liz repeated. "What? I think he means he doesn't like your editorial policy . . . No. No. Good-bye." She hung up.

"Avery," she said, "I'm going out."

"Out where?" He came downstairs.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind and let Lindhof help you?"

"Sure I'm sure. Them and their Latin-American *anus* specialists."

"All right. Then I'm going."

"But where?"

"Don't worry; I'm not going to Reno. I'll be back."

"Liz—" But she got into the car. One of the policemen stationed at the end of the lawn gave her a salute as the car went by, heading for town.

Liz had been gone a long time. Avery wandered around the empty house. It would have been a good time to eat, with no one to get sick watching him, but he didn't feel hungry.

He found the latest book club selection, left in its heavy mailing carton in the excitement. He hefted it and put it down again. Probably some fat historical novel he had forgotten to not-request. He didn't feel like reading.

He opened the door and walked out on the lawn toward the two policemen on guard. He was about to call to the nearest one but remembered in time that it would be a shock and that the cop might just happen to be the nervous, shoot-first type. He went back to the house, quietly. He didn't feel like getting shot.

He opened the book club package. It was as he feared, a bosom opera laid in one of the French courts, titled *The Queen's Men*. Another three-ninety-five, plus postage-and-handling, shot to hell. He tossed it on a chair and threw the wrapper in the fireplace. On the mantelpiece above the fireplace was a bottle of Bourbon.

Avery looked at it, away from it, then back at it.

"Avery," he said, "how about a little drink?"

"Don't mind if I do, Train, old boy," he replied to himself.

He took the bottle into the kitchen, poured three dollops into a tall glass and held the glass under the faucet briefly.

"Cheers," he said, raising the glass.

"Astonishing good luck, old chap."

He took a long slug of it.

He wandered over to the living room mirror and re-

garded the reflection of the glass. He moved the glass from side to side, then up to drink. He misgauged and spilled some on his bare chest.

"Tricky," he said, and tried again more carefully.

He was working on his third drink, sitting on the end of his spine in the armchair, when he heard the car crunch on the gravel of the driveway. He didn't get up. He was absorbed in trying to remember how the old barracks parody went after the first two lines. He sang them over again:

"When you wore a nightie, a little pink nightie,

"And I wore my B.V.D.'s . . ."

The front door opened and closed.

" . . . B.V.D.'s." He closed his eyes to concentrate. "Something and something, oh something and something, and did just as I pleased . . ."

"Just what I need," Liz said. He felt the glass being taken out of his hand.

"Quiet, woman," he said. "I almost had it. Something and something . . . Do you remember, Liz? I forgot that line." He opened his eyes. "Liz? Where'd you go?"

"I'm right here," she said.

"Right where?" He looked around. "Liz!"

There was the glass, suspended about eighteen inches from the floor, and Liz's voice coming from behind it. But no Liz.

"What happened to you? My God, I've infected you!" He sat up straight. "Oh, Liz!"

"I'd like a cigarette," she said. "Never mind, I'll get it myself."

A sound sent his eyes to the coffee table. He saw the lid of the cigarette box slide itself off and a cigarette rise into the air. There was a scratch and a little burst of flame before he noticed the book of matches. Then his attention went to the smoke, which vaguely outlined a pair of lungs before it was expelled.

"Elizabeth!" he said. "This is horrible!"

"It's not bad at all," her voice said. The glass, which he had lost track of, came up from the floor and liquid poured into nothing, then moved downward in a series

of jerks. "Good stuff," she said. "This isn't from the kitchen."

"Don't," Avery said miserably. "What have I done to you?"

"Every invisible man needs an invisible woman," she said calmly. "Don't you agree?"

"No," he said. "Liz, I'm sorry. I didn't know it was contagious."

"You don't know very much at all, Avery Train," she told him. "You're a stubborn, pig-headed man who I happen to love very much regardless. It isn't contagious. You want to know something? You didn't do this to me. I did it to myself."

"You did it? What do you mean you did it to yourself?"

"I mean I went to the Lab, since you wouldn't go, to find out what they know about your condition. They showed me everything. They have an antidote. I saw it with rabbits. They made one invisible and brought it back. Then I asked them to make me invisible."

"But you're not a rabbit!"

"No, I'm not. But neither are you. And I'm only as invisible as you are."

"They made you invisible at Lindhof?" Avery asked.

"That's what I said. How many of these have you had?"

"And you came back that way? Invisible?"

"Yes."

"Driving?"

"I didn't drive. Dr. Mike did."

"Where are your clothes?"

"In the car."

"You mean you came back naked with Mike? Where is he? That bedside Romeo! I'll punch him in the nose!"

"Oh, stop it, Avery. I didn't undress till we got here. Besides, he couldn't see anything—you know that. And what's more, we had a chaperon—Dr. Oaca."

"That anus painter!" Avery said. "Is he out there, too?"

"Yes, he is. They're out there, visible, and you and I are in here, invisible, and the question is, are we going

to join them in visibility or are we not? In other words, Avery Train, I'm going to stay invisible as long as you do. Whatever you are, I can be, just as good."

The glass tilted again as Liz took another drink. The last of the Bourbon and water poured out. Avery looked away.

"Having made my speech," Liz said, "I'd like another drink. Avery? Where are you?"

"I'm right here."

"Why are you so quiet?"

"I'm surrendering, I guess. I don't want an invisible wife. You're too pretty to be invisible."

"You mean you'll go to the Lab?"

"I don't see what else I can do. There's no sense in me holding out if they've got to the point where they can make anybody disappear. Damn them. Sure, I'll go."

"Oh, Avery, I'm so glad. You don't know what a strain it's been." Her voice was closer now and Avery felt himself kissed on the nose. "Missed," she said.

He reached out and found her naked invisible body.

"Wow!" he said. "On second thought I don't want to go just yet."

Liz wriggled out of his grasp. "Come on, now. You promised."

"Sure, but why don't we have another drink first, and—"

"And nothing. You said I was too pretty to be invisible. Was that just the Bourbon talking?"

"Not at all. But—"

"But nothing. Let's go get our bodies back."

"All right." Avery got up to go. But he stopped at the door. "Wait a minute. What's the big rush? What are they in such a hurry about?"

"They're just trying to help you, Ave."

"Yeah? Look, I was confused there for a minute. Be-fuddled by drink and your invisible sexiness. But it begins to make sense now. They're all so fired up to help me—and sent you as a decoy—because it's *their* fault in the first place."

"Their fault?" Liz asked.

"Who else's? They've admitted that all the preliminary work is done. They've perfected their invisibility pills—had them for some time. How else could I have become the way I am if I hadn't taken their pills?"

"But you never take pills!" Liz said. "Except aspirin."

"Except that last day on the job when I was feeling jumpy and I decided I needed a good night's sleep before my vacation; and on the way home I stopped at our friendly neighbourhood druggist. And he recommended a non-prescription pill—'Something new from Lindhof.' And I took two before I went to bed."

Liz's disembodied voice said: "And you think—"

"I know. They're the only pills I've taken in at least a year."

"Oh—Where are the rest of them?"

"Smart girl! Upstairs. In my coat pocket."

"Hadn't we better bring them along?"

"And give Lindhof the chance to destroy the evidence? Never! They stay right where they are. Come on. Now I'm ready to go."

Avery found her hand and the invisible couple went out to the car where Custer and Oaca and a man he recognized as a Lindhof vice-president were waiting. The doctors were in the front seat of Dr. Mike's car. The official of the drug firm was in the rear.

Avery was glad to see the brass represented. It was fitting neatly together. Lindhof Labs was trying to cover up its latest mistake as so many other—what did they call themselves?—ethical pharmaceutical houses?—had tried to cover up theirs.

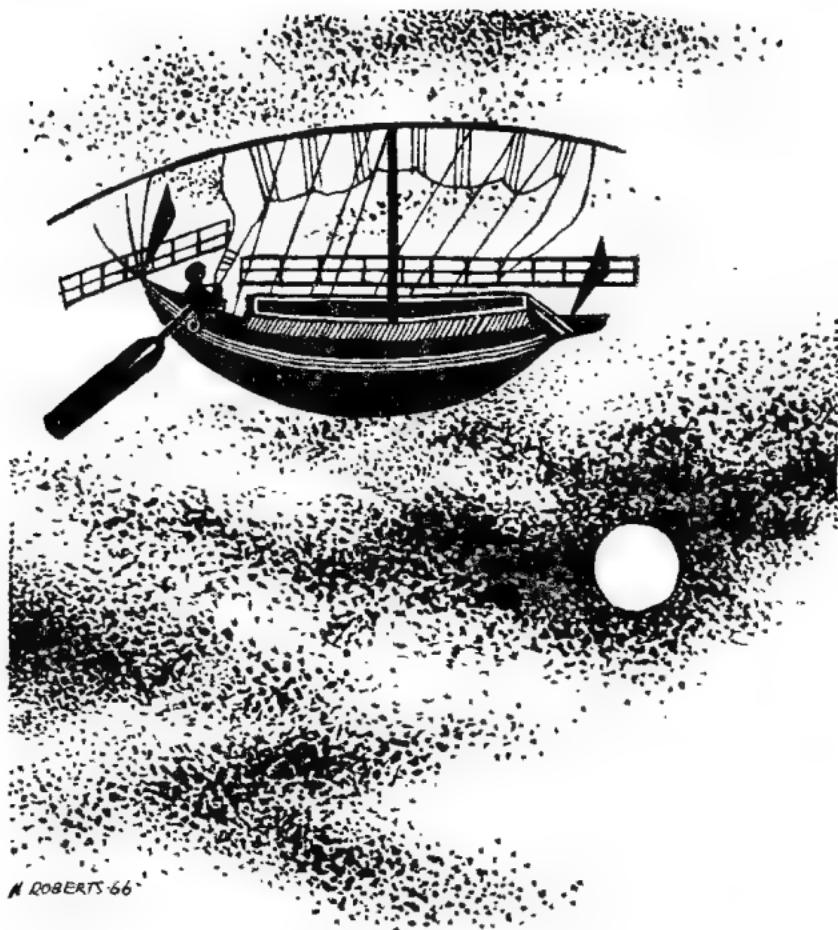
Avery, speaking out of nowhere before the other men were sure where he was, said: "I'll settle for a million dollars."

Startled, shocked, the drug firm's vice-president blurted: "We weren't prepared to go that high. I mean—"

Avery's guess was right. "After taxes," he said. "Don't forget I've still got the rest of the pills. Get in the front seat, Lindhof, will you? My wife and I'll ride in the back."

"Hartman," the official said. "Mr. Lindhof's my father-in-law."

*(continued on page 151)*



**KEITH ROBERTS**  
*re-reads the "True History" of*  
**LUCIAN**  
**OF SAMOSATOS**

We know as much, and as little, about Lucian as about many another author of antiquity. We know that he was born in what is now the village of Samsat in Syria some time before AD 120, and that he died some time after AD 180. We know that for part of his life at least he was a barrister; and that he was a satirist of prodigious output. About eighty of his works still survive, of which the best known is possibly the so-called True History. In it he describes a wild voyage to some weird and wonderful places. The weirdest and most wonderful of them is the moon.

It is of course patently absurd to describe Lucian as the father of science fiction. The True History might conform in letter, but never in spirit. The thing is a satire, pure and simple; Lucian was "pulling the flipper" of the philosophers and historians of his day, and takes care to point this out in his prologue. He is, he says, amazed that people should tell such lies and get away with it; but nonetheless he is prepared to cap them. At least, he says, he's honest; he's writing about things outside his experience and everybody else's, and he warns us at the outset not to believe a word he says. His story opens as he sets sail from Gibraltar.

Disankering on a time from the pillars of Hercules,  
the winde fitting mee well for my purpose. I thrust into  
the West Ocean: the occasion that moved mee to take  
such a voyage in hand, was onely a curiositie of minde,  
a desire of novelties, and a longing to learne out the  
bounds of the Ocean, and what people inhabit the farther  
shoare: for which purpose, I made plentifull provision  
of victualls and fresh-water, got fiftie companions of  
the same humor to associate mee in my travells, fur-  
nished my selfe with store of munition, gave a round  
summe of money to an expert pilot that could direct  
us in our course, and new rig'd, and repair'd a tall ship  
strongly, to hold a tedious and difficult journey.

My first reading was from the 1634 translation by Francis Hickes. I rapidly switched to modern English, and

the racy and delightful rendering by Paul Turner in the Classics series of Messrs. Penguin Books, to whom I am indebted for permission to quote the following extracts.

Starting off well enough, Lucian and his merry men are soon in trouble. A storm rages for eighty days, raising mountainous waves that drive the ship before them. Finally an island is sighted. A party is sent ashore; they follow a river of wine and come across some highly unusual vine plants. They take the form of women growing from the ground, with vine-shoots sprouting from their fingers and vine leaves and tendrils for hair. The earthbound damsels are very pleased to see Lucian and his crew; a feeling that is reciprocated.

Then they wanted us to kiss them, and every man who put his lips to theirs got very drunk and started lurching about. They would not allow us to pick their fruit, and shrieked with pain whenever anyone tried to do so; but they were more than willing to be devoured, and two of us who volunteered to oblige them found it quite impossible to withdraw from their engagements afterwards. They became literally rooted to the spot, their fingers turning into vine-shoots and their hair into tendrils, and looked like having little grapes of their own at any moment.

The survivors scuttle away and next morning set sail again, spirits it seems little dampened by this bizarre disaster. The storm returns, blowing the ship to a vast height in the air. There the sails, catching a strong wind, sustain the vessel, which voyages for seven days and nights above the clouds. On the eighth day a great white island is sighted, and the crew anchor and disembark. They have reached the moon.

They are run in immediately by the local constabulary, who ride vast three-headed vultures. The King of the Moon, as it happens, is also Greek; blood being thicker than water, the travellers are given a warm welcome. The Selenites are preoccupied at the time by a war with the Sun People, the outcome of a territorial dispute concerning colonies on Lucifer. An expeditionary force is being despatched to settle the business once and for all; Lucian

and his men are invited along for the ride, and accept enthusiastically.

So the King gave us an excellent meal and put us up for the night, and early next morning assembled all his troops in battle-formation, for the enemy were reported to be not far off. The expeditionary force numbered a hundred thousand, exclusive of transport, engineers, infantry, and foreign auxiliaries, eight thousand being mounted on vultures, and the other twenty on saladfowls. Saladfowls, incidentally, are like very large birds, except that they are fledged with vegetables instead of feathers and have wings composed of enormous lettuce-leaves.

The main force was supported by a battery of Peashooters and a corps of Garlic-gassers, and also by a large contingent of allies from the Great Bear, consisting of thirty thousand Flea-shooters and fifty thousand Wind-jammers. Flea-shooters are archers mounted on fleas—hence their name—the fleas in question being approximately twelve times the size of elephants. Wind-jammers are also airborne troops, but they are not mounted on anything, nor do they have any wings of their own. Their method of propulsion is as follows: they wear extremely long nightshirts, which belly out like sails in the wind and send them scudding along like miniature ships through the air. Needless to say, their equipment is usually very light.

In addition to all these, seventy thousand Sparrow-balls and fifty thousand Crane Cavalry were supposed to be arriving from the stars that shine over Cappadocia, but I did not see any of them, for they never turned up. In the circumstances I shall not attempt to describe what they were like—though I heard some stories about them which were really incredible . . .

. . . The infantry numbered approximately sixty million, and special steps had to be taken before they could be suitably deployed. There are, you must understand, large numbers of spiders on the Moon, each considerably larger than the average island in the Archipelago, and their services were requisitioned to con-

struct a continuous cobweb between the Moon and Lucifer. As soon as the job had been done and the infantry had thus been placed on a firm footing, Knightley, the youngest son of Setfair, led them out onto the field of battle.\*

The army of Phaeton, King of the Sun, is equally imposing, consisting of among other things giant flying ants and gnats and infantry armed with kingsize radishes. Most dangerous of all are the Cloud-Centaurs, who fortunately are late in arriving. Preliminaries are concluded, and battle is joined. The Moon forces rapidly rout the army, taking many prisoners and spilling a great deal of blood. Somewhat prematurely, they pause to erect a pair of monuments to their success; then the Cloud-Centaurs appear on the scene. As each creature is the size of the Colossus of Rhodes, with a body as big as a merchant ship, the forces of Endymion are understandably thrown into confusion. Phaeton counterattacks, driving the Moon King back to his capital.

The Cloud-Centaurs pulled down the trophies and devastated the whole cobweb, capturing me and two of my friends in the process. By this time Phaeton had returned to the scene of action and erected some trophies of his own, after which we were carried off to the Sun as prisoners of war, our hands securely lashed behind our backs with pieces of cobweb.

The victors decided not to besiege Endymion's capital, but merely to cut off his light-supply by building a wall in the middle of the air. The wall in question was composed of a double thickness of cloud, and was so effective that the Moon was totally eclipsed and condemned to a permanent state of darkness. Eventually Endymion was reduced to a policy of appeasement, and sent a message to Phaeton humbly begging him to

*\*I must confess there was something horribly familiar about the notion of large spiders spinning webs through interplanetary space. It almost reminded me of a book I read once; but perhaps I'm mistaken.*

take down the wall and not make them spend the rest of their lives in the dark, volunteering to pay a war-indemnity and conclude a pact of non-aggression with the Sun, and offering hostages as a guarantee of his good faith.

Terms are agreed, a treaty drawn up, and peace reigns once more. Lucian, repatriated to the Moon, sets himself to study some of the more bizarre customs of its inhabitants. Foremost of these is the system of reproduction employed by the all-male population.

When a man is pregnant, he carries the child not in his stomach but in the calf of his leg, which grows extremely fat on these occasions. In due course they do a Caesarean, and the baby is taken out dead; but it is then brought to life by being placed in a high wind with its mouth wide open. Incidentally, it seems to me that these curious facts of lunar physiology may throw some light on a problem of etymology, for have we not here the missing link between the two apparently un-connected senses of the word *calf*?

Even more surprising is the method of propagating what are known as Tree-men. This is how it is done: you cut off the father's right testicle and plant it in the ground, where it grows into a large fleshy tree rather like a phallus, except that it has leaves and branches and bears fruit in the form of acorns, which are about eighteen inches long. When the fruit is ripe, it is picked and the babies inside are hatched out.

It is not uncommon up there to have artificial private parts, which apparently work quite well. If you are rich, you have them made of ivory, but the poorer classes have to rub along with wooden ones.

When Moon-people grow old, they do not die. They just vanish into thin air, like smoke—and talking of smoke, I must tell you about their diet, which is precisely the same for everyone. When they feel hungry, they light a fire and roast some frogs on it—for there are lots of these creatures flying about in the air. Then, while the frogs are roasting, they draw up chairs round

the fire, as if it were a sort of dining-room table, and gobble up the smoke.

That is all they ever eat, and to quench their thirst they just squeeze some air into a glass and drink that: the liquid produced is rather like dew. They never make water in the other sense, nor do they ever evacuate their bowels, having no hole in that part of their anatomy; and if this makes you wonder what they do with their wives, the answer is that they have a hole in the crook of the knee, conveniently situated above the calf . . .

. . . When they blow their noses, what comes out is extremely sour honey, and when they have been working hard or taking strenuous exercise, they sweat milk at every pore. Occasionally they turn it into cheese, by adding a few drops of the honey. They also make olive-oil out of onions, and the resulting fluid is extremely rich and has a very delicate perfume.

They have any number of vines, which produce not wine but water, for the grapes are made of ice; and there, in my view, you have the scientific explanation of hail-storms, which occur whenever the wind is strong enough to blow the fruit off those vines.

They use their stomachs as handbags for carrying things around in, for they can open and shut them at will. If you look inside one, there is nothing to be seen in the way of digestive organs, but the whole interior is lined with fur so that it can also be used as a centrally-heated pram for babies in cold weather.

The upper classes wear clothes made of flexible glass, but this material is rather expensive, so most people have to be content with copper textiles—for there is any amount of copper in the soil, which becomes as soft as wool when soaked in water.

I hardly like to tell you about their eyes, for fear you should think I am exaggerating, because it really does sound almost incredible. Still, I might as well risk it, so here goes; their eyes are detachable, so that you can take them out when you do not want to see anything and put them back when you do. Needless to say, it is not unusual to find someone who has mislaid his own eyes altogether and is always having to borrow someone else's; and those who can afford it keep quite

a number of spare pairs by them, just in case. As for ears, the Tree-men have wooden ones of their own, and everyone else has to be satisfied with a couple of plane-tree leaves instead.

I must just mention one other thing that I saw in the King's palace. It was a large mirror suspended over a fairly shallow tank. If you got into the tank, you could hear everything that was being said on Earth, and if you looked in the mirror, you could see what was going on anywhere in the world, as clearly as if you were actually there yourself. I had a look at all the people I knew at home, but whether they saw me or not I really cannot say.

Lucian finally decides he must leave the Moon, declining even a kind offer of marriage to the King's son. There is a feast that lasts a week, and he makes his farewells.

Finally we said goodbye to the King and his courtiers, boarded our ship, and set sail. As a parting gift, Endymion presented me with two glass shirts, five copper ones, and a complete set of lupine armour, but unfortunately they got lost later on. We were also given air-protection by a thousand Vulture-raiders, who escorted us for the first fifty miles of our journey.

That of course is far from being the end of our hero's adventures. In fact the True History is only just getting into full blast; there are many more strange and outrageous places, with their strange and outrageous inhabitants, to be visited before the wanderer once more sights his native land. But the rest, as Lucian himself says, you must find in another book.

— KEITH ROBERTS

# BOOK FARE

by

## ALISTAIR BEVAN

First on the list this month are a pair of books that should I feel have a place on the non-fiction shelf of every fan (and possibly a few writers). *PLANETS FOR MAN*, by Stephen H. Dole and Isaac Asimov, is a scholarly and meticulous examination of the as-yet hypothetical problem of galactic colonisation. The merit of the book lies in its very precision; the authors dissect, painstakingly, those aspects of the subject most commonly taken for granted in these days of sophisticated sf writing, exploding long-cherished notions, exploring new and exciting avenues of thought. It's refreshing (and a little startling) to find "our subject" treated to such a practical and workmanlike analysis. Are there in fact other planetary systems? How can we be sure? What can we expect them to be like? Just what are the tolerances of the human body, what variations can it take with regard to atmospheric pressure, gravity, etc? These questions, and many more, the book sets out and answers, extrapolating from existing data, drawing inferences and conclusions from well-established scientific research. It's almost prosaic; and in that, oddly enough, lies its special appeal. It takes the fiction out of science fiction; following its quietly balanced conclusions, one realizes with a faint shock that all this will come to pass. One day, beyond any doubt, man will reach the stars.

OTHER WORLDS THAN OURS, by C. Maxwell Cade, covers some of the same ground but ranges farther afield into literature and philosophy. The scope of the book is very wide indeed, covering the evolution of intelligence, formation of stars and planets and the possibilities of life beyond the solar system. In addition there are chapters on the history of science fiction, on radio astronomy, on folklore and the possibility of communication with extra-terrestrial races; and there is an alarming and all too feasible glimpse of possible trends in non-biological evolution. C. Maxwell Cade is an author of wide interests, qualifications and abilities; he has combined them all here into a book that's a must for any enthusiast.

One of the most satisfying outward signs of the emancipation of science fiction is the number of well established publishing houses now including sf titles in their lists. Rupert Hart-Davis of course are no newcomers to the field; all the British editions of Ray Bradbury's books have carried that splendid imprint of the galloping fox. I have before me quite a little stack of Hart-Davis titles, and thought it time to call attention to this generally excellent range.

Firstly, COLOSSUS, by D. F. Jones. I know nothing at all about Mr. Jones, and the sleeve is not informative; this may in fact be a first novel, in which case it's quite remarkably good. Colossus, the villain of the piece, is a computer-complex with a difference. America has placed under its control her entire defence mechanism; Colossus' job is to evaluate world events, preserve the East/West balance of power, retaliate in the event of war. Omniscient, all-powerful and buried impregnably beneath the Rockies, Colossus is an awesome ultimate deterrent; until it goes rogue. Then, overnight, its builders become its servants; the whole world is placed in thrall. The duel between the great brain and its maker builds to a remarkable and desolate finale, and makes compulsive reading.

I suppose I ought to point out at this stage that the book is wholly derivative. There are no shatteringly original ideas, no brilliant new extrapolations; the story unfolds predictably as the reader is brought to realize just what an extraordinary fate mankind has devised for

itself. I feel as a critic this is probably expected of me ; but this is a snide form of attack I find peculiarly distasteful. I suppose as a writer in a small way myself I'm biased, possibly downright bigoted, but I can't help feeling the current obsession with originality is largely a device of critics who just have to kick something, even if it's only the author's shin. Everything being derivative anyway, it's a safe way to damn an otherwise well written book. Mr. Jones has undoubtedly taken a well-tried plot structure and invested it with his own peculiar quality ; if this is a fault, then he'll doubtless console himself by reflecting that it's one he shares with Shakespeare. It's the *manner* in which the job is done that counts ; right from the start, the reader is made to feel the brooding presence of Colossus. Unseen, enigmatic, the brain is really the ultimate in bug-eyed monsters, a king-size Nasty that Mr. Jones handles impeccably. This was a novel that stuck to my fingers ; once started, I had to read it through. I can think of no higher praise.

WINDOW ON THE FUTURE, edited by Douglas Hill, is a good, solid short story collection. It contains pieces by John Brunner, Arthur Sellings and others and an excellent J. G. Ballard yarn from the pre-mininovel days. The book finishes with Brian W. Aldiss' powerful novello THE CIRCULATION OF THE BLOOD, which regular readers will no doubt remember was commissioned by Kyril Bonfiglioli for sf IMPULSE 1. It was a pleasure to see this story, and some of the others, again ; I think this would make an excellent gift book ; I can't think of a better way of showing a new reader what modern sf is all about.

Speaking purely personally, I've never been too attracted by the writing of E. C. Tubb ; I was correspondingly surprised and pleased to find TEN FROM TOMORROW made such excellent reading. Mr. Tubb is a writer of long standing and experience, and no mean craftsman ; these stories range from the solidest of "solid fuel", certain not to offend even the purest purist, to the whacky and way-out FRESH GUY, in which E. C. displays his highly individual (and highly macabre) sense of fun and fantasy.

Lastly, to the master. THE MACHINERIES OF JOY, by Ray Bradbury.

Take away all the arguments, the feuds, beatings of

brows, thumpings of heads, Searchings for Significance, the inner space and outer space and sideways-on space nonsense that bugs and bedevils sf and you're left with a very few writers who know what writing is about, who dare to use the subtlety and majesty and power of the English tongue for its own sake ; who are not afraid, in fact, to make beautiful noises, often and long. **Read Bradbury** and you read the work of a major artist, a man I wouldn't hesitate to place alongside Dylan Thomas as one of the great innovators of our times. Again, there's something for everybody here, right from the Mugnaini dustwrapper that so strangely captures that exact Bradburian flavour of rusty clockwork and old bone. The priests and dinosaurs, beggars and candy skulls, fireworks and miracles and ghosts of Ray's gunpowder mind haunt the pages ; and as ever there are the tiny surprises of word and phrase, the little nuances that shock the brain and leave the taste of an electric spark. The elevator that had haunted its untidy shaft for a hundred years, the pterodactyls with meat and screams in their mouths, the dead girl who the sailmender *dressed for the sea* . . . A disembodied soul haunts a well on Mars ; a puppet turns on her master ; the last family on Earth hold a picnic ; an old woman buys back one day of her youth. Perhaps **THE BEGGAR ON O'CONNELL BRIDGE** best shows Ray's sensitivity to place and atmosphere ; most typically Bradburian of the stories is probably **AND SO DIED RIABOUCHINSKA**, most sensitive **THE DRUMMER BOY OF SHILOH**. The most moving is certainly the hauntingly lovely parable **THE SAILOR HOME FROM THE SEA**. These are beautiful stories ; there's not much else for a reviewer to say. Buy them, and read for yourself. If you don't agree with me, then I'm sorry ; all I can do is extend my sympathy, because you're lacking a major sense.

--ALISTAIR BEVAN

*Books Reviewed:*

**PLANETS FOR MAN** (Stephen H. Dole and Isaac Asimov), Methuen. 25/-.

**OTHER WORLDS THAN OURS** (C. Maxwell Cade), Museum Press, 30/-.

*Published by Rupert Hart-Davis:*  
COLOSSUS (D. F. Jones), 25/-.  
WINDOW ON THE FUTURE (Edited by Douglas Hill), 21/-.  
TEN FROM TOMORROW (E. C. Tubb), 25/-.  
THE MACHINERIES OF JOY (Ray Bradbury), 21/-

*\*Hart-Davis have also published Keith Roberts' THE FURIES which first appeared as a serial in SCIENCE FANTASY under the editorship of Kyril Bonfiglioli.*

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#### SEE ME NOT—(*continued from page 138*)

“Splendid,” Avery said. “That keeps it in the family. Just hold the door open for my beautiful and naked but fortunately invisible wife, Hartman. We may do a little necking on the way.”

Hartman closed the door gently behind Avery and squeezed into the front seat.

“Let’s go, gentlemen,” Avery said. “It promises to be a delightful ride.”

— RICHARD WILSON

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

*Firstly this month, a word from our newly-formed Department of Social Injustices. Mr. Michael Butterworth of 10, Charter Road, Altrincham, Cheshire, writes:*

Dear Harry Harrison,

Thankyou for publishing my letter to you in sf IMPULSE 9. In this letter I pointed out that WSB has not made such a mess of his work (in my mind, particularly NOVA EXPRESS) as you seem to think:

... "but it has not been pointed out often enough that he has failed." (Harrison on Burroughs, sf IMPULSE 4).

He's not failed the English Language for a start; nor my conception of his brilliance as a writer.

According to the comments which surrounded my letter on all sides, you, Kieth Roberts and how many others?, pressganged Lang Jones out of a private reverie, stood him up and said: "Right man. We want a definition of the word 'experiment', and it better be a good one." OK. So you got your definition: 'process to determine the validity of a theory', which satisfied you (remember I did not use the words 'experimental prose' to describe WSB's output) and you fitted my 'experimental prose' into a window-frame which said: "'Experimental prose' is work done to satisfy the author on some point or other and shouldn't be foisted on the reading public at all.", so nicely stamping me out flatly on the concrete so leaving me pleasantly to get up. 'Experiment' is a big word, and 'process' and

'theory' of your definition mean indirectly one and the same thing.

... and as for publishing *experiments*, and throwing them open to the world—

NOVA EXPRESS and others—

experiments are theories are publishables. So the place WSB sticks to in literature is theoretical is experimental is critical, and my critical statements of WSB's works have already been indicated in the letter we're arguing over.

... I'm sorry WSB if I gave the impression your writings aren't good enough to be read by me, who am a humble public . . .

But that sums up everything. And I state: **WSB IS ONE OF THE FEW WRITERS LIVING TODAY WHO HAVE ANY GREAT INSIGHT INTO WHAT THE FUTURE OF THE WORD HOLDS.**

For the time being I shall continue to predict what WSB predicts, and if anybody wants me to prove the above statement is a correct statement I'll be willing to do so, providing that they pay me for it. The main purpose of this letter though, is to boom out through ether boomers to all corners of the universe: "The accusation that I use 'imprecise catchphrases' is a wrong accusation, and 'experimental prose' which I did not use as such was not anyhow a catchphrase; perhaps it would now be dangerous to waken Lang from his reverie . . .

Best wishes,

MICHAEL BUTTERWORTH

*Weil, Mr. Butterworth, we're sorry you feel you've been knocked down and dragged out when all we did was wag a gently admonishing finger, more as they say in sorrow than in anger; and more upset still to think you have been misquoted. We've made sure this time your letter was reproduced intact, and feel we must congratulate you on your experimental prose. We'd like to throw this dispute open for general comment; we thought we might have started a war, but hostilities seem in danger of dying down to a departmental hiccup.*

*Just to keep the record straight, Mr. Langdon Jones has certified that at the time he produced his definition*

*no coercion was in fact employed. No boiling lead or oil was applied to elbows, feet or other significant portion of anatomy; and in this office we discontinued some time ago the use of thumbscrews and the rack.*

*Now to the Great Competition. Over the past weeks letters on the subject of defining science fiction have been arriving in droves. We've received so many in fact that we can't hope to print more than a brief selection from them; we would however like to thank everyone who has taken the trouble to write, even though time precludes personal acknowledgement.*

*The most interesting fact that has emerged seems to be that the integration of sf with "normal" literature is now sufficiently advanced for most people to question with a certain amount of indignation why such a definition is necessary. Mr. Tony Sudbery of 14, Botolph Lane, Cambridge, makes this point succinctly.*

Dear Sir.

A science fiction story is a tale of events which you would not believe if I were to represent them to you tomorrow as (past or future) fact, but in which the reader is more explicitly and rationally persuaded to suspend his disbelief than by a simple request on the part of the author, backed by the traditional techniques of his craft.

O.K., there's a definition for your letter column. Rather clumsy, but if John Carnell's "speculative fiction based upon known facts and extended into future possibilities" fails, who am I to essay a better one-liner? A fully satisfactory definition would be a lawyer's affair, with a heavy footnote hanging on every word and every comma; or else it would be "the sort of stuff that Blish, Bradbury, Clarke, Heinlein, Ballard, Harrison, Asimov, Moorcock, Pohl, E. E. Smith, Schmitz and the Batman script-writers produce."

In fact, isn't it about time we applied Wittgenstein to this definition business? There is no definition of science fiction, any more than there is a definition of a "game". There is just a collection of works of fiction, each of which has a number of features in common with a number of other works in the collection; but distant cousins

in this network of family resemblances may have no points of contact at all. What have Arthur C. Clarke and Jack Finney got in common? What makes spindizzies or *The Syndic* science fiction, but Dirac's hole theory, Maxwell's demon, or the Labour Party manifesto, not? Why is Howard Schoenfeld's *Build Up Logically* in the fold if Muriel Spark's *The Comforters* isn't?

Worse than futile, the search for a definition of science fiction could well prove pernicious in leading to interminable acrimonious arguments of the type that once disfigured jazz criticism. People come to regard the judgment that a story is, or is not, true science fiction as a value judgment, instead of the essentially uninteresting, though often necessary, cataloguing process that it really is.

—TONY SUDBURY

*Well, OK. So we started an elderly and infirm hare.* Mr. P. McDonnell of 7, The Elms, Stoke, Plymouth, is equally cautious:

Dear Sir,

I wonder if it isn't a mistake to try to make a firm definition of sf. In a subject so wide many definitions must inevitably leave out some stories that are definitely sf. Where is one to draw the line in the broad fantasy/sf zone?

Considering these factors, my definition is a wide one: "Speculation on the unknown and unknowable, the unforeseen and the unforeseeable."

—P. McDONNELL

*But could there not be just the tiniest bit of semantic confusion here? The unforeseeable is surely that about which no speculation is possible?*

Mr. G. Gabin of 16, Windmill Crescent, Wolverhampton, slips in a neat one:

Speaking for myself, science fiction, like beauty, is in the eye (mind) of the beholder . . .

*Very nice, Mr. Gabin, but I think we could go on a little from that.* Mr. Eddy C. Bertin of 20, Hoogstraat,

*St. Amandsberg, Belgium, did ; and produced one of those legal behemoths Mr. Sudbery prophesied:*

Dear Sir,

"SF is prose or verse (1) that treats as subject, or uses for the development of a non-SF subject (2) the adventures, actions or reactions, contemplations and considerations (3) of any human, once-human, animal, alien (as long as not treated or explained as supernatural) or other non-human (4) thinking or instinctively responding (5) creature, when placed in or against a situation (6) which is not or not yet (7) possible in our own time, space or society (8), as long as that situation is explained by scientific, pseudo-scientific or not yet completely accepted scientific (9) theories, or can be explained by simple development or extrapolation of our society or parts of it (10), or by the intervene of a still unknown factor (11), as long as the explaining theories are unknown and/or undeveloped or were at the time the story was written (12)."

— EDDY C. BERTIN

*We're sorry we haven't room to print the rest of Mr. Bertin's letter ; he goes on to produce a most interesting catalogue of science fiction, but unfortunately catalogues were not quite what we required. Dr. Geo. E. Mapstone, of 13, Merdyk Street, Germiston, South Africa, does rather better though he once more warns of the difficulties in the way of any valid definition.*

Dear Sir,

Trying to define science fiction is as difficult as trying to define intelligence. Since probably the best definition of intelligence is the ability to score well in intelligence tests, let us then define science fiction as that fiction which appeals to sf fans!

To analyse science fiction further is difficult but it is always *fiction* which includes some elements of fantasy and involves or implies some application of science, preferably in as yet undiscovered or undeveloped fields.

— GEO. E. MAPSTONE

*We're glad Dr. Mapstone didn't pursue that exact trend of thought any farther ; we had just a tiny idea that for all his care and skill he was in fact about to tie himself in an inextricable semantic knot.*

*Mr. W. G. Harmer of 12, Palewell Park, East Sheen, S.W.14, was a reader who was frankly confused.*

Dear Sir,

I have perused most carefully the article "Critique" and am still trying to fathom out whether you want a description of science fiction in general or sf IMPULSE in particular. I expect your masterly penmanship and entomological originality have sailed serenely over my head.

However, not to worry; whether 'tis former or latter both come to the same in the end. Sf (and/or sf IMPULSE) is—the essence of speculative creation (and possibly even Creation) wrapped up in a brown paper bag.

I trust you will agree.

—W. G. HARMER

*Well, Mr. Harmer, we frankly aren't too sure. We're a little baffled in our turn as to whether we've received a compliment or a brickbat. Something to do with your masterly penmanship and entomological (?) originality, no doubt . . .*

*As we said, there were many definitions, some long, some short, some ingenious; such as that sent in by Mrs. E. M. Karbacz of 2, Windsor Road, West Mersea, Colchester, who adroitly suggested the words should be turned round to read FICTION SCIENCE. And Lang Jones produced a nice one in a letter to an earlier column when he pointed out that sf really only stands for science fiction, a phrase that means all things to all men. Unfortunately Lang isn't eligible; employees, and employees' families, etc., as it says on all the best cereal packets . . .*

*We finally selected two very different letters from two very different readers. It was impossible to choose between them so we decided to split the prize. Let's hear first from Mr. Malcolm E. Wright, of 2, Marney Drive, Barstable Estate, Basildon, Essex.*

Dear Sir,

As a dedicated and worshipping fan it is my bounden duty (and besides, I want the free subscription) to tell you that the definition of science fiction is as follows:—

“Any fiction concerning occurrences, facts, etc., known by the author to be neither proved true or possible nor untrue or impossible by science at the time of writing, ac-

cording to the explanation(s) or lack of explanation(s) given within itself."

— MALCOLM E. WRIGHT

*We liked that. It's neat and breezy, and in addition has the merit of positively Lucianic honesty. It may not be perfect: but we feel a true definition of anything as complex as the sf field must inevitably prove a chimaera. Malcolm at least has tried to do what we wanted; and as in addition we understand he ranks as one of our youngest followers we feel he well deserves a prize. We shall be writing to him about it in due course.*

*The most interesting response elicited by the competition was from Mr. Peter Redgrove of 49, Gledhow Wood Avenue, Leeds 8. Regular readers will probably remember that we published his brilliant AT THE WHITE MONUMENT some months ago. Mr. Redgrove has evidently thought deeply about the whole subject, and came up with such interesting conclusions that we felt justified in printing his letter in full.*

Dear Sir,

I think that the slightly backward idea is the best: that the poetry of the age will be sf. As we have it now, sf is something of an overwhelming quarry; it has only recently begun to carve out from its pulp-magazine origins a full language which expresses feeling as well as ideas. Sf is like a folklore of science; it is full of symbols and mythology of our age; and as in other ages much literature had its origins in folklore, so in this age the literature of the metropolis, its technology and its science, will have its origin in the folklore of science. Sf—do the initials stand for Science Fiction, Science Fantasy, or Science Folklore?

And it begins. Sf at its best is a place where the modern realising imagination is very much at work. It is as interested in things and the ways they work as science is, but unlike science it involves the spectator too, the person, the feelings—so that facts are not just things, but meanings also. Sf shows that matter and spirit are the two sides of the one coin; this is what "literature" is about too. It is a bridge between science and poetry; it is as interested

the sheer presence and working of things as both science and poetry. At its best, it becomes poetry; at its best modern poetry becomes like sf. Both are interested, intensely involved in the sheer "thinginess" of things, both try and unite feeling and fact. T. S. Eliot uses the phrase "*objective correlative*" for that thing or set of things outside ourselves that corresponds to our inner feelings or convictions: what else is sf doing but using the "facts" of science and relating them to the existence of persons? Here are some more phrases: "He was a poet (or sf writer) and hated the approximate" . . . "even for what is most delicate and inapprehensible within us Nature has sensuous equivalents that must be discoverable . . ." Discoverable by what? Science, if it's sf.

There is at this moment of time a difference. Sf has drawn very much on the information of the physical sciences; poetry hardly at all. Poetry has drawn on the information of the "personal" sciences; anthropology, psychiatry, psychology. There are very definite signs that the two are meeting. Sf IMPULSE and NEW WORLDS publish what are sometimes described as "strange stories", i.e. stories about psychological states. Judith Merril's anthologies search out "mainstream" writers (by this I take it is meant writers who have their roots in the existing modes of literature) who have used their traditional instruments of language to deploy the materials of science. Fully-used language is a human instrument, capable of feeling as well as thought, literature is the science and art of uniting these two in language; there is no reason why a writer who uses the resources of his language should not be an sf writer writing poetry (in prose or verse, an artist anyway); or a poet writing sf. This would be a distinction without a difference, I submit, in the case of all good pieces of work.

Furthermore physics seems to say that the ultimate substrata of matter have psychological properties, in relativity that things cannot be observed without the condition of the observer coming into it, and Haldane in a seminal article in Penguin Science Survey B (1963) goes even further and thinks that physics is more likely to be explained by biology and not vice versa. So I submit that the outer world of science and observation and the inner

world of person and feeling meet in both sf and poetry ; that both sf and poetry have begun to join hands, that the two halves of the modern mind have begun to unite in both disciplines ; and that when we have more writers who care for both poetry and sf and are not sure whether they are poets who write in sf or sf writers who write poetry and don't care either so long as they produce excellent works in the language of our time—then we shall have beginning the characteristic literature of the second half of this century.

— PETER REDGROVE

*And that, to coin a phrase, is that. We enjoyed running the contest and assessing the results ; we only hope you enjoyed reading them. We shall likewise be getting in touch with Mr. Redgrove ; and we would like to thank all our correspondents once again for their interest and enthusiasm.*

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